RED ASHES

MARGARET PEDLER

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BY

MARGARET PEDLER

AUTHOR OF
THE HERMIT OF FAR END,
THE BARBARIAN LOVER, ETC.

"No race is over till the last yard's run,
No game is ever lost—until it's won,
A fire is never dead
While the ashes are still red,
Nor the sun set in the skies until
The day is done."

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RED ASHES
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PROLOGUE

IT headed the list of marriages in *The Times,* a single unobtrusive little notice, couched in the customary bald form of words wherewith two human souls announce to the world at large that they have embarked together on the biggest adventure of life.

"On the 14th Oct., Hamilton Phillips . . . to Claire Rosemary, daughter of the late Rev. R. G. Neville, Rector of Brinsnympton, Devon."

The man who had just unfolded the newspaper stared at the curt, printed lines. There was neither anger nor concern in his face, merely a blank incredulity. It was a lean young face, strenuous with the eager, fighting qualities of modern youth. A hint of deviltry in the keen, clever eyes, of passion in the mobile mouth, premised a certain undisciplined recklessness of temperament.

"Claire . . . Hamilton Phillips . . ." he muttered. And then, as if the spoken words bestowed a semblance of actual fact upon what had hitherto appeared inconceivable farce, a look of sudden, stark fear leaped into his eyes.

"It's not true!" he said loudly.

His hands—nervous, sensitive hands of the surgeon type—closed tightly on the paper, and he re-read the announcement very slowly and painstakingly, as though he

were deciphering something written in a language with which he was not well acquainted.

It couldn't possibly be true, of course. Claire—*his* Claire—was going to marry him—him, not some other fellow called Hamilton Phillips. The name had a faintly familiar sound, but he couldn't place it, and for the moment he let that slide. It didn't really matter. What mattered was that only six weeks ago, before he had come up north to act as *locum* for old Dr. Macpherson while the latter was away on holiday, Claire had gripped his hands hard and said:

"Good-bye, boy. This may be just the beginning of things. Go and make a success at Aberlochie. Who knows? It may lead to something else and be one step on the way towards our marriage. Anyway, don't worry. You know I'll wait for you, and I'm not afraid of being poor—I'm used to it."

The gay little laugh with which she had wound up reassured him as much as the words themselves. It was so utterly care-free and light-hearted. Moreover, it was perfectly true that Claire was used to being hard-up. The beauty chorus of the Breakaway Revue, of which she made one, was not exactly overpaid, and even though it would be necessary to go slow during the first year or so of their married life, he knew that he would be able to make it all up to her later on, when his Harley Street visions had materialized and those deft, unerring hands of his had set him in the front rank of the operating surgeons of the day. He had complete confidence in the future—a confidence justified by his brilliant career as a medical student and by his record during the last two years of the war.

So it was perfectly absurd that anyone should have inserted this ridiculous announcement of Claire's marriage in the papers, and he wondered rather irritably which among his pals—the cheery crowd of hard-working, irre-

sponsible youngsters whom he had left behind in London—had been trying to be elaborately funny at his expense.

Hamilton Phillips! It was odd how the name seemed to clamour at the door of some subconscious knowledge. He tried to track it down, absently turning over the pages of the newspaper while he pursued it along elusive mental corridors. All at once his keen eyes checked . . . concentrated. The words which had arrested them flared up at him in heavy-leaded capitals: "MILLIONAIRE AND BEAUTY CHORUS GIRL." His glance raced along the subjoined paragraph.

"One of the charming members of the beauty chorus in the Breakaway Revue has broken away in good earnest. With the marriage of Miss Claire Neville to Mr. Hamilton Phillips, the well-known millionaire and race-horse owner, which took place at the registrar's office early yesterday morning, the Century Theatre loses one of its most promising young dancers. It is whispered that more than one theatrical manager has had his eye on Miss Neville, whose delightful singing and dancing has singled her out for favourable criticism on more than one occasion.

"The marriage was strictly private, only one or two intimate friends being present, and, although the news somehow trickled out, the newly married couple successfully eluded the small crowd of inquisitive folk which gathered . . ."

The rest of the paragraph had no meaning for the man who was reading. The paper straggled from his fingers to the floor.

"Then it's true!" The words broke from him hoarsely. "It's . . . true!"

After that he went down into hell—into the bleak, horizonless hell which encompasses a man whose whole world has suddenly crashed, leaving him with only a tangled wreckage of shattered dreams and torturing, unfulfilled desires.

* * * * *

"Hullo-ullo-ullo! Here he is, you chaps—sulking in his tent like old thingumybob!"

"The devil he is! Come out of it, young-fella-my-lad. We're going to buzz you off to Edinburgh town for the evening."

Was it hours—or years—afterwards that the gay young voices broke across the black silence which had closed round him? Rather stiffly he lifted his head from his numbed arms, elbows resting on the table, and stared curiously at the new-comers. What were they doing here, these boys—medical contemporaries of his student days, with whom he had since kept in touch? They belonged to that part of his life which was over—to the cheery, post-war London days which a brief notice in *The Times* had sufficed to set illimitably far away, marking it indelibly as the past.

"Here, come out of the clouds, old son." One of the merry trio on the threshold led the way into the twilit room, and, fumbling for the switch, flooded it with light.

In the sudden illumination the lifted face of the man at the table gleamed pallidly. The eyes were hard, hard and peculiarly bright. The corners of the mouth looked pinched and a grey shadow hollowed the cheeks.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

The trio chorused back vivid explanation.

"Scoborough's bought a car——"

"And buzzed us up from little old London to see ye banks and braes."

"We nearly brought Claire along with us——"

"Claire?" He laughed a little. "Didn't you know she was married to a millionaire—yesterday?" (Claire—who was "not afraid of being poor!" Oh! But she had been afraid of it—so miserably afraid that she had successfully shirked it for keeps.)

"Married!" "Yesterday!" The chorus of ejaculation rattled incredulously about his ears. In reply, indicating

the wedding notice with a perfectly steady finger, he handed *The Times* to the man nearest him, who read it in a queer, hushed silence and then passed it on to his companions. Shocked into sudden gravity, the three stared awkwardly at the man they had come to find, tongue-tied, like most of their race, when confronted with a situation that called out all their sympathy. Presently the eldest of them gripped his hand and wrung it hard.

"Look here," he said. "It's—it's damnable. There's nothing one can say—or do. I wish to God there was!" —fiercely. "Come along with us, and forget it—for one night, anyway."

"Yes, come on," urged the others. "It's the best thing you can do. Don't stay brooding here. It won't mend matters."

The man at the table rose slowly.

"No," he said. "I think you're right. It's the best thing I can do. I'll come with you."

He moved towards the door, his gait a little uneven. Outside, a cloud-swept moon flung a wavering light across the bonnet of the car. The engine was humming softly.

"We'll make a night of it," suggested someone.

The man who loved Claire Neville gave a sudden reckless laugh.

"Yes," he said. "We'll make a night of it."

It was after five in the morning when he stumbled across the threshold into the house once more. Friendly —though none too steady—hands gripped his in farewell.

"Never say die, old chap! No woman in the world is worth it." "So long. See you in London soon." " 'Bye. *Cheerio*!" And the car rocked off perilously down the road on its return journey to Edinburgh, thirty miles away, leaving him alone with only the blurred memories of the evening for company.

"A night of it." His speech was a trifle hoarse and

unsteady. "We made a night of it all right. Quite all right."

He flung himself into a chair and stared out at the dawn-lit skies. The blurred memories began to sort themselves a trifle. Dinner—a rollicking, reckless dinner, accompanied by an amazing quantity of champagne. Someone had footed the bill, of course, but whether it was he himself or one of the others he hadn't an earthly. Then dancing—dancing, and some woman with the face of a child and a melting lure of voice that no man with red blood in his veins could have denied. Afterwards, the thirty-mile rush along the desolate night-roads, swerving, skidding, missing death by an ace more than once. . . . Oh, yes, he had made a night of it all right. His head felt as if someone had lit a fiery furnace inside it.

He dragged himself up from his chair, and, crossing the room to a cupboard in the wall, took down a decanter of brandy and tried to pour some out into a tumbler. His hands shook a little and the decanter clinked maddeningly against the edge of the glass, the spirit spilling over on to the floor. He swore softly under his breath. Then, steadying his hands for a moment with an effort of will, he half filled the glass and lifted it to his lips.

Pr-r-r-r! The door-bell thrilled suddenly through the house. There was something imperative, urgent in its piercing sound, and with a muttered ejaculation the man set down his glass untasted and went to answer it. As he threw open the door the pale daylight rushed across the threshold into the darkened hall, mercilessly revealing his haggard face and weary eyes. In the road outside a car throbbed impatiently, and a scared-looking chauffeur began to gabble out his errand.

"One of the young gentlemen taken suddenly ill up at Craigie Lodge . . . been in terrible pain for some hours. . . . Would the doctor come at once?"

The relaxed muscles of the haggard face tightened up. A look of temporary alertness fought its way back into the clouded eyes. The man whom Claire had jilted, and who had made an all-night fool of himself in consequence, was suddenly ousted by the healer who hears and responds intuitively to a claim upon his skill. Half a dozen keen, pertinent questions, a few moments to collect all the possibly necessary paraphernalia indicated by the symptoms, and the doctor seated himself beside the chauffeur, who had already climbed into his place behind the wheel, and was driven swiftly away in the direction of the Lodge.

There he was confronted by the confused ferment and disorder which prevails in a house visited by unlooked-for and terrifying illness. The laird himself met him at the door, his kindly, weather-beaten old face puckered into lines of acute distress. It was a guest in the house who had been taken ill—a friend of his son's, he explained. They had spent the previous day shooting over the moors, and the boy—four-and-twenty meant no more in the eyes of the old laird—had seemed perfectly fit and had made some of the finest shots of the day. Then, with the night, had come this agonizing pain. . . .

The haggard-faced young doctor listened attentively. His brain did not seem quite as clear as usual, and he was conscious of a furious irritation because he could not concentrate his thoughts satisfactorily. Mixed up with the symptoms detailed by the laird there came the rocking of the car as it slewed its way along the Edinburgh road, drifts of song, and the memory of a woman's face —half child's, half angel's, but with eyes that held an infinite grim knowledge.

Later, however, when he stood beside the patient's bed, his mind seemed to clear. That swift grasp of all the salient factors of a case, which had marked him out from the beginning as a man destined for a brilliant future, came back to him as with accustomed, sentient fingers

he touched and handled the boy's pain-racked body.

"Well . . . well? What is it? What's wrong with the lad?" the laird asked him agitatedly.

He answered in a few words—brief and terrible to their hearer.

"Operate?—Immediately? Do you mean it, man?"

"It's imperative." He replied without hesitation. He had no faintest doubt of the absolute necessity. It was amazing—amazing beyond words in the circumstances—that his mental faculties should be so unimpaired, and he was conscious of a curious sense of gratitude to the someone or something that had cleared his befogged perception just when there was such dire need of balanced judgment.

. . . Yes—he could have help. There was a hospital sister on holiday amongst the Lodge guests—it was she who had bidden them send at once for a doctor. She had given an anæsthetic under doctor's direction before—oh, yes, he could trust her.

"I *must* trust her," he answered grimly. "It's a matter of life and death."

Presently he was unpacking his instruments while someone boiled the water in which to sterilize them. Half absently he lifted one of the shining knives and held it up to the light. It trembled a little against the background of grey sky framed in by the window. Was it some subconscious apprehension which had led him thus to test the steadiness of his hand? He started at the slight quiver which shook the delicate blade he held. The next moment the knife slipped from his fingers and fell clattering to the floor, and the nurse, busy with her preparations, looked across at him with startled eyes.

God! Were the last twelve hours—was that "night of it" he had made in Edinburgh—going to get back at him now, nullify the perfect clarity of his brain by a nervous tremor of muscles? He set his teeth. It should not . . .

it should not. He would *force* his hands to steadiness. . . .

It was all over. He had bungled. At the most critical moment of all his knife had slipped. . . .

The first shock of awful realization, followed by those terrible, interminable hours of incredulous horror and desperate remorse, was past, and now the train was bearing him swiftly away from Aberlochie. He gazed blindly out of the window, seeing nothing of the fields and hedges that flew by. Two things only seemed indelibly impressed upon his mental vision—the white, dead face of the boy upon whom he had operated, and the face of old Dr. Macpherson—who, summoned back by wire, had arrived in time to see him die—a face set rigidly in lines of ruthless condemnation.

"Man, you've killed him!" Mercilessly Macpherson flung the hideous truth at him. "But for you the lad would be alive this moment. To all intents and purposes, you've murdered him."

CHAPTER I

A COUNCIL OF WAR

"SUPPOSING we fix Saturday week for the opening meet?"

Toby Wayne threw out the suggestion with an air of detachment which deceived no one. Both his hearers were perfectly well aware that for him, as for them, the selection of a date for the opening meet of the Rakehill Foxhounds was a matter of superlative importance. For Toby, indeed, it constituted the event of the year. Master and owner of the pack, as his father had been before him, he only contrived to endure the boredom of the summer months by dint of focusing his mind on the promised delights of the next hunting season. And now that the time had at last arrived when the fixing of the date for the first meet of the year came once more within the realm of practical politics, he was hard put to it to keep the almost boyish anticipation out of his face. He was not able to keep it quite out of his eyes—merry, light-blue eyes, fringed with sandy-fair lashes—as they went eagerly from one to the other of the two faces turned towards him.

"What do you think about it, Bubbles?" he added, addressing the tall, lithe-limbed young giant who was leaning up against the chimneypiece and between whose remarkable good looks and his own more commonplace, weather-beaten features there was yet sufficient family resemblance to justify the presumption that they were brothers. But the straight, sandy hair and irregularly featured face with its light-blue eyes and powdering of freckles which was all

wherewith an unkind fate had dowered Toby had been amended in the case of his brother by a sweep of crinkly, honey-gold locks like those of some young god, features which might have been the chiselled work of a sculptor, and a pair of darkly-blue eyes that laughed gaily out at the world from between two lines of short black lashes and made their way straight to every woman's heart without the least intentional effort on the part of their owner. As someone had once said of him, he was "almost too beautiful to be true." During his tender years his ridiculous likeness to Millais' famous picture had earned him the soubriquet, Bubbles, and it had stuck to him ever since.

In response to his brother's tentative inquiry, he smiled across at him with lazy amusement.

"My revered elder brother, what is the use of our fixing up anything without consulting Pam? You know perfectly well that if we choose a day which doesn't meet with her approval, she'll simply wipe it out—and we shall all join enthusiastically in helping her to do it—precisely as though we'd never settled on it. So we might just as well wait till she comes and decide the matter then."

Lucian Gale, the third member of the party, nodded approval. He was seated rather precariously on the edge of the table, dangling his legs, and his dark eyes and brown, dare-devil young face made a striking contrast to the blondness of the two Waynes.

"Yes," he agreed crisply. "Let's wait for Pam. Give her a halloo, Bubbles."

The younger Wayne obediently strolled across the room and, opening the door, sent a rousing shout into the sunlit spaces of the house beyond. A voice drifted downwards from the upper regions.

"Coming!"

Followed the sound of light footsteps and a minute later Pamela Wayne herself entered the room. She was boyishly slight, and her slenderness, taken in conjunction with her

bobbed head of russet hair and the shortness of her skirts, revealing a pair of adorably slim legs, combined to make her look considerably younger than her twenty-two years. There was small resemblance between her and either of her two brothers. The touch of red in her hair—inheritance from the paternal side of the family—and a dust of freckles across the bridge of her nose served in a measure to relate her to the sandy Toby, but it was not until she smiled that a transient family likeness, linking her to Bubbles, could be detected.

Her glance sought his first of all, and something in the expression of her eyes as they rested on his face—an instant softening that was almost maternal—suggested that brother and sister were united by some fundamentally deeper tie than usual. The other two men had risen at her entrance, and after that first swift, instinctive glance towards Bubbles she held out her hand to Lucian Gale.

"Hullo, Loo. You're an early morning visitor. What's the matter?" she asked gaily. "You all look frightfully solemn."

"It's the occasion of a most momentous decision. We want to fix the date of the opening meet, and of course we can't settle it without you!" He spoke lightly enough, but an eager fire had lit itself in his dark eyes with her entrance. She smiled up at him nonchalantly as she sank into the chair he drew forward for her and helped herself to a cigarette from his case. She had come to look upon Loo's devotion as an accepted fact and more or less negligible. He had been consistently in love with her from the time when, as a small girl of fifteen, wildly rebellious under the tutelage of successive governesses, the adoration of the tall young Harrovian, several years her senior, had seemed to her homage indeed. But seven years had elapsed since then, and with the passage of time values alter. Nowadays, Lucian Gale counted for no more than half a dozen other men she knew. He proposed to her about once a year,

with commendable regularity, and was as regularly refused, and during the intervening time a staunch friendship, founded on mutual understanding and a similarity of tastes, bound them together.

"The date of the opening meet?" she said considerингly. "Well, it ought to be pretty soon, surely?"

Toby nodded.

"That's what I thought. I suggest Saturday week."

"'M." Pamela signified approval. "And where?"

"Why, Trelyan Cross, of course."

The answer came simultaneously from Toby and Bubbles. The opening meet of the season had been held at Trelyan Cross from time immemorial.

"Why not, Pam?" queried Loo, sensing her unspoken dissent. "We've always met there for the opening."

"I know we have. And almost invariably hounds run from there in the Trethry direction."

"Well?" said Toby. "Suppose they do? What then?"

"Why, then there'll be trouble," returned Pamela succinctly. "Because that means crossing Boscowen, and Carrington, the new man there, swears he won't allow the hunt to pass over his land."

"Oh, I shouldn't think he means that," asserted Bubbles airly.

"I'm rather afraid he does," returned Loo. "He's peppered the whole farm with hideous boards bearing the legend: 'No TRESPASSERS ALLOWED.'"

Toby's eyes twinkled.

"I haven't trained my hounds to read," he observed.

"No. And you haven't trained 'em to keep out of traps, either," retorted Loo dryly. "You don't suppose a man like the new owner of Boscowen Farm will stick at erecting mere notice-boards, do you? Probably he's put down enough traps to lame half the pack."

"Well, what are we to do, then?" asked Bubbles.

"Go and see the fellow, I suppose," replied Toby sav-

agely. "And talk to him for his soul's good. It's appalling to think of getting an unsportsmanlike swine of that kind at Boscowen. The last chap who farmed it was such a rattling decent sort. It's a thousand pities he quitted—and I shall jolly well tell the new man what I think."

"If you approach him in that winning mood, I don't think you'll do much good," commented Loo, smiling briefly. "At least, not as far as the hunt is concerned."

Bubbles laughed outright—that spontaneous, infectious laugh of his which was almost as equally responsible for his popularity as his absurd good looks.

"No," he said. "He'll probably merely respond by adorning the place with a few miles of barbed wire in addition to the traps and notice-boards."

Toby kicked the logs together in the hearth with an angry foot and broodingly watched the resultant flames leap upward.

"It's a confounded nuisance," he growled. "We've never had any trouble of this kind before."

Which was very literally true. Not one of the farmers of the country hunted by the Rakehill pack would have dreamed of raising the slightest opposition to anything proposed by the young Master of Foxhounds. The Waynes, both dead sire and living son, had gained a reputation as plucky, hard-riding sportsmen, who grudged neither time nor money to the sport they loved, and notwithstanding what certain of the neighbours and the hard-working farmers of the district might think of the wild doings which had long made Rakehill Manor a by-word in the countryside, and of the way in which the manor lands were starved in order that every penny might go to the upkeep of the hunt, they had always accorded an odd, indulgent sort of loyalty and admiration to the entire Wayne family. So that now it was almost inconceivable to the younger generation of Waynes that a new-comer should establish himself

in their midst who had the temerity to prohibit hounds from running over his land.

"Well, who's got any better suggestion to make?" demanded Toby, at last. "This Carrington man must be dealt with somehow."

"I propose we let Pam deal with him," said Loo. "She has a habit of getting her own way with people, and there seems no particular reason why Carrington should prove an exception to the rule. Presumably"—with a slight smile—"he's merely an ordinary human man."

"Not at all a bad notion," seconded Bubbles. "He won't be able to refuse you, Pam. No one ever does. You're a horribly spoiled young person, you know," he added teasingly.

"Never heard of the pot calling the kettle black, I suppose?" retaliated Pamela. "No, thank you, boys," she went on. "I don't feel disposed to make a burnt-offering of myself on the family altar and interview this unpleasant Carrington person. It's a man's job—primarily the duty of the M.F.H., I should imagine."

Toby made an expressive grimace.

"Ugh! You know what'll happen if *I* tackle him. I shall most likely mislay that amiable temper of mine and tell him a few home-truths which will inevitably result in my being hoofed out through the front door. That is"—modestly—"if he's a bigger man that I am."

"Which he probably is," returned Pamela unkindly.

Toby, however, was quite hardened to the pointed comments to which his bare five-foot-five of stature rendered him liable. The smallness of his build was accentuated by comparison with his younger brother's six foot of bone and muscle, but, as he was wont to observe, "It may have its disadvantages when you're trying to look over another fellow's shoulder, but it's a confounded sight more handy when it comes to a question of hunting. It takes about half the family income to mount our hefty young Bubbles,

while I can nip across a country on any weedy little rat of a horse that's foaled, provided he's got pluck." So he smiled at Pamela with undiminished good-humour.

"Which he probably is," he assented, nodding. "For all I know, he may be a veritable Samson for strength—in which case"—significantly—"the matter seems to demand some delicately feminine method of solution such as was practised by the young person called Delilah."

Bubbles slipped his arm round his sister's shoulders.

"Be a sport, Pam, and go and interview this Carrington creature," he said coaxingly. "You'd pull it off if anyone could."

"Oh, I suppose I should," she admitted. She spoke quite naturally and without elation. It was quite true what Lucian Gale had said—that she "had a habit of getting her own way with people," and the possibility of failure in this particular instance never seriously occurred to her. "Very well. I'll go over to Boscowen Farm and see what I can do. But you really are a set of cowards"—smiling at the three men impartially—"hiding behind a woman's petticoats the moment a difficulty arises!"

Bubbles regarded her with a critical eye.

"The modern fashions don't seem to me to afford overmuch cover," he submitted impertinently.

Pamela laughed and rumpled his hair affectionately as she rose to her feet.

"Well, you make the most of what there is, anyway," she retorted. And departed, leaving three much relieved young men to congratulate themselves on the upshot of the council of war.

CHAPTER II

NO TRESPASSERS ALLOWED

THERE had been more than a substratum of truth underlying Pamela's parting shot. Ever since she came to years of discretion it seemed to her she had been unravelling tangles and straightening out difficulties for her masculine belongings, and now she would really have felt rather at a loss if they had suddenly developed signs of being able to manage matters for themselves.

Until rather less than a year ago there had been three of them to think for, her father and Toby and Bubbles—and the first-named had not infrequently appeared to be the youngest and most irresponsible of the three.

Harvard Wayne had been a big, gay young man, one of the finest and most reckless horsemen in the county, and when youth departed it left him still big and gay and as hard-riding as ever, and he had ended his life, appropriately enough, with a broken back in the hunting-field he loved so well.

His death had affected his children in a somewhat curious way. They felt his loss, not so much as a father, since he had never either attempted to exercise any paternal authority over them nor exhibited any very deep fatherly feeling, but as a good pal who had been suddenly taken from their midst. They missed him most of all on a hunting morning when, of the four who had been wont to ride out so gaily from Rakehill Manor to the meet, with the hounds bunched together in their rear, there were now only three.

The welfare of his pack of foxhounds had been the chief

aim and object of Wayne's existence. The cottages on his estate might need repair, the Manor-house itself might—and did—require a good deal in the way of rehabilitation, but it affected him not one jot so long as his horses and hounds were in condition and the stabling and kennels in tip-top order.

In the same way his duties as the father of a family had weighed but lightly upon him. He had paid for governesses for Pamela and school fees for his sons, and these constituted his whole conception of his paternal obligations. That the governesses systematically gave notice because they found themselves unable to cope with their rebellious young pupil, and that the school termly reports invariably pointed out that the younger scions of the house of Wayne had omitted to distinguish themselves in anything outside the playing fields—although there they reigned supreme—failed to disturb his equanimity in the slightest degree. It would have worried him immeasurably if any of his children had acquired a bad seat in the saddle, but as this was very far from being the case, he troubled himself no further concerning them, and they were about as lawless and dare-devil a set of young people as could well be imagined.

Their "goings on," indeed, formed one of the staple topics of conversation in the village of Trelyan, which was kept in a chronic state of shocked excitement by the doings up at the Manor. But, nevertheless, a broad kind of tolerance was extended towards them, if for no other reason than for the fact that they had no mother. Mrs. Wayne had died a few hours after the birth of Bubbles, but, even had she lived, it is greatly to be doubted if she would have exerted any restraining influence upon the lives of her children. She had been a fretful, complaining woman, absorbed in the many imaginary ailments from which she believed herself to be suffering, and to Harvard Wayne, at least, her death had come as a release from a very galling chain. Attracted by a certain fluffy prettiness

she possessed—the kind of prettiness which fades in a few years—he had married her in his early twenties and regretted it ever afterwards. Twelve years later he met Judy Sarton, the one woman who counted, and learned the full significance of what real love betwixt man and woman might mean.

But the revelation came too late. Although by this time his wife had been dead a year, Judy Sarton was already hopelessly mismated when she came into his life. Radley Sarton, her husband, a widower with one son at the time he met and married her, had been a shrewd, long-headed man more than twenty years her senior, whose horizon was bounded by the respective tin and rubber yields of the various mines and estates in which he held a controlling interest. He had about as much understanding and appreciation of his wife as an elephant would have of a butterfly. Still, in his own prosaic fashion he had loved her, and it was to please her that, when they came home to England from the Straits Settlements, he had bought Trethry, a beautiful old place in Cornwall, about two miles distant from Rakehill Manor. And it was when the Sartons had come to live there that Harvard Wayne had met and fallen headlong in love with Judy.

His love for her had been the one good and beautiful thing in an otherwise heedless life. Judy, straight as a die herself, had helped to make it beautiful. She had faced the fact, and forced him to face it, too, that the fulfilment of their love was forbidden, and, instead, she had given him a steadfast, unfailing friendship. For eight years she had been his most intimate friend and confidante, and, insofar as might be, had tried to mother his motherless children, sensibly advising as to nurses and governesses and schools, and generally keeping a practical eye on the welfare of the happy-go-lucky family at the Manor. Then had come Radley Sarton's sudden decision to return to the Straits Settlements and personally super-

vise the working of certain rubber estates which belonged to him, and from that day until the day of his death, ten years later, the one controlling and steadying influence in Wayne's life had been absent, and things at the Manor had been pretty well allowed to take their course.

Pamela had been only a child of eleven at the time, but in some precocious way she seemed to sense her father's helplessness and in an odd, unchildlike fashion had tried to fill the gap created by Judy Sarton's departure. Not that she exercised any kind of restraining influence. Far from it. She was as wild as a young colt herself, and was always in the forefront of any mischief that was afoot. But she did try to be helpful, and since she was never afraid of difficulties, it gradually became the family custom to turn to her in any emergency. Bubbles, indeed, had learned to regard her as a kind of sheet-anchor in every storm. He was two years her junior, and although, when they were children together, she led him into a variety of scrapes, she always got him out of them again and invariably took the full blame of their mutual misdoings on her own shoulders. And now that he had reached the dangerous age of twenty, and his scrapes were frequently of his own contriving, it was still Pamela who came to the rescue, paying his debts whenever she could squeeze the necessary money out of the housekeeping purse, and tactfully extricating him from the various budding love-affairs in which he managed to entangle himself with lamentable frequency. Perhaps he was not entirely to blame for this latter habit. When you are twenty, and look five years older and rather like a young Greek god into the bargain, the feminine portion of your world is rather apt to crowd your horizon, with bewildering results.

Be that as it may, Pamela threw herself into the breach every time it was a question of trouble for Bubbles. And it was his beguiling, "Be a sport, Pam, and go and see this Carrington creature," which had prevailed upon her to

try and induce the new owner of Boscowen Farm to reconsider his decision regarding the hunt. It was, as she had pointed out, primarily the affair of the M.F.H., and if it had concerned Toby alone, she would probably have left himself to wangle the matter for himself, win or lose. But it happened to concern Bubbles just as intimately, and since he wanted to hunt over the Boscowen land, the "Carrington person" must be induced to see reason.

So she set out philosophically enough on her errand, accompanied by Tatters, the Irish terrier, who was her almost invariable companion. It was paying the latter rather a fulsome compliment, perhaps, to describe him as an Irish terrier, since he was unmistakably a mongrel of uncertain antecedents. Still, the Irish predominated both in his character and appearance, so it was allowed to go at that. If he could break rules, he did, and much as he adored his mistress, this did not in the least preclude him from disobeying her if the spirit moved him. But he was always excessively repentant afterwards. An injury received in a glorious fight with a dog about twice his size and weight had left him with a perpetual droop in one ear, which gave him a raffish and tatter-demalion appearance, and when he was in disgrace he would sit and gaze at Pamela with one inquired ear cocked up and the other drooping rakishly over a remorseful topaz-brown eye until he was once more restored to favour.

To-day, having been recently the recipient of a sound thrashing from one of the stablemen for stealing the latter's mid-morning lunch of bread-and-cheese, he started off by trotting very sedately along at Pamela's heels, oozing virtue from the tip of his moist black nose to the quivering stump of his tail. You might have thought he had never heard of, much less taken any interest in, the great game of rabbit-hunting. Pamela, who usually kept him under strict surveillance when they took their walks abroad, gaining confidence from such model behaviour, gradually

allowed her mind to wander and forgot all about him, and presently, realizing with all a dog's keen perception that he was no longer under observation, Tatters sloped quietly off into the bushes and disappeared from view.

His mistress continued her way unheeding, her thoughts preoccupied with her impending interview with the "Carrington person." She supposed that she had rather a difficult task ahead of her, and she was nerving herself for an ungracious reception. There had been a good deal of gossip concerning the new owner of Boscowen since his arrival in the district. He had made it very clear that he had no wish to make the acquaintance of his neighbours, and the one or two inquisitive spirits who had attempted to visit him had never been allowed to get further than the front-door mat. In consequence, the consensus of opinion in the village was dead against him. It wasn't natural not to want to "pass the time of day" with one's neighbours, averred the inhabitants of Trelyan, arguing from internal evidence, and there must surely be something wrong about the new arrival. He was probably no better than he should be. Very likely, if the truth were known, he was hiding away from the long arm of the law in the obscurity of this lonely country parish in Cornwall. Anyway—this was the usual concluding remark of any discussion relating to the new-comer, those that lived longest would see most.

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED! As Pamela crossed the boundary-line separating the Manor lands from those of Boscowen Farm, she was greeted by a glaring white notice-board bearing the above inscription in menacingly large black letters. She glanced up at it, shrugged her shoulders disdainfully, and walked on, undeterred.

Her path lay through a straggling wood whence one emerged abruptly upon a twenty-acre meadow. She knew the way very well. Many a time during those early days when she had been suffering under the rule of successive governesses had she made good her escape in the direction

of Boscowen Farm. Here she would lie *perdue* for hours at a time whilst the unfortunate woman whose duty it was to instil a certain daily modicum of knowledge into her rebellious young brain was painstakingly searching Rakehill for her recalcitrant charge.

Old Farmer Bartlett, as he made his daily rounds, not infrequently passed by some glade or hollow where the bracken fern half hid Pamela's lean little body, capped by its crop of copper-brown hair, an illicit story-book lying open on the ground in front of her, and her small eager face, supported by a pair of grubby little hands, bent intently above it. And Farmer Bartlett, being a sportsman through and through, never once divulged what he had seen. Instead, he very often discovered a rosy-cheeked apple or a pasty, still hot from the oven, in one or other of his capacious pockets and deposited it beside the young truant before continuing his tramp. And now old Bartlett was dead and young Bartlett, his son, as good a sportsman, every bit, as his father before him, and a staunch supporter of the Rakehill Hunt, had emigrated to Australia and the farm had passed into the hands of an objectionable misanthrope who erected notice-boards to warn people off the property.

As Pamela emerged from the muddy footpath through the woods and mechanically stooped to unlatch the meadow-gate, the sound of thundering hoofs aroused her abruptly from the thoughts in which she had been immersed. Startled, and with a sudden breath-taking fear of what might be the significance of that rushing sound, she looked up. Approaching from the other end of the field, and galloping at full speed, were a couple of young thoroughbred colts, and hard upon their heels, barking ecstatically, came Tatters. They passed her, going like the wind, snorting with terror, manes and tails streaming as they flashed by.

Angrily she called to Tatters to come to heel, but she might as well have addressed the empty air. He took not

the slightest notice of her, but continued to chase the colts with renewed enthusiasm. More than once one of them lashed out at him with vicious hind-legs and he came within a hairbreadth of sudden disintegration. But the whirling hoofs just missed him each time, and, indignant at the offered insult, he only increased his efforts, barking furiously as he dashed along in wild pursuit.

Round and round the field they went, tufts of grass and mud spattering up behind the horses' hoofs as they raced along. Pamela was in despair, divided between fear lest either of the colts, mad with terror, should rush blindly into some low-hanging branch of a tree or dash itself against the stone wall which fenced the further end of the field, and terror lest she should see Tatters' brains kicked out before her very eyes.

And then, without any warning, a shadow suddenly fell across her path and a man's voice, harsh with anger, broke on her ears:

"What the devil do you mean by letting your dog run those colts like that? Call him off! Do you hear? Call him off at once!"

CHAPTER III

THE "CARRINGTON PERSON"

PAMELA whirled round to face the speaker and received an impressionist picture of a tall, lean figure and of a pair of curious blue eyes blazing at her out of a dark, saturnine face.

She laughed almost hysterically.

"'Call him off!'" she repeated. "I've called till I'm *hoarse!*"

The man beside her swore softly under his breath. Then, as the colts came tearing up the length of the field once more towards the gateway, he rapped out sharply:

"Try again—when I head them off!"

He turned and vaulted the gate, clearing it with a supple ease which, even amid the stress of the moment, evoked a fugitive flash of admiration in Pamela's mind. The next instant, as the colts came galloping towards him, he sprang in front of them, shouting and waving his arms. Startled by the sudden apparition, both young horses swerved instinctively, plunged a few times, then halted some yards away, stamping and snorting. Simultaneously Pamela called imperatively to Tatters. Seeing the colts brought to bay, the latter realized that the game was up, and, conscious of a chilly presentiment of the imminence of retribution, he came crawling towards her, his sinful little body flat to the ground. She made a grab at his collar, dragged him close to her side, and, with a sigh of relief, felt him subside into a small, abased heap at her feet.

Meanwhile the man who had intervened was talking

coaxingly to the frightened horses, approaching them step by step as he coaxed. At first they edged nervously away from him, but at length they allowed him to come up with them and stood quietly while he stroked and patted them reassuringly. When they had calmed down a little, he gave them a final friendly slap on gleaming flanks and, letting them trot away, turned back to where Pamela was still standing. He came straight up to her and bent over the grovelling Tatters.

"With your permission, I'll teach this dog a lesson," he said curtly.

The cool assumption in his voice roused her to instant opposition. Her hazel eyes sparkled angrily. They were oddly attractive eyes, long in shape, the iris flecked with tiny specks of onyx black and gold, and the brows above them were very dark and straight. They met the man's blue ones defiantly.

"You shan't touch him!" she said.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well. Thrash him yourself. It doesn't matter who does the job, so long as he gets his thrashing."

Under ordinary circumstances Pamela would undoubtedly have administered condign punishment to the erring Tatters—every dog who lives in the country must perforce be trained not to chase horses and cattle. But because an absolute stranger—and a man whom she felt perfectly sure must be the detestable "Carrington person" himself—presumed to dictate what should be done in this particular instance, she forthwith decided that nothing would induce her to beat the dog or allow him to be beaten.

"He isn't going to be thrashed," she remarked composedly.

A slight change passed over the man's face and his eyes glinted disagreeably.

"Oh, pardon me, but he is," he said quickly. "The only question is: Who is going to do it for him—you or I?"

He paused, waiting for her answer. There was some-

thing oddly determined about him as he stood there, and she was angrily conscious of a queer little clutch at her heart—not of fear, precisely, but of something that was certainly rather akin to it. She retreated a step, thrusting the dog behind her with a touch of her foot. Tatters, as though sensing the wrath to come, hastened to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

"No one is going to do it," she retorted proudly. "I certainly am not—and I shouldn't think of allowing you to do so."

He smiled.

"I said 'with your permission' at the start," he returned. "But I'm afraid, if you won't give it, it will have to be without."

A flush rose to Pamela's cheeks.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Look here"—he spoke temperately, as though reasoning with an obstinate child—"look here, those colts belong to me. They're worth at least a couple of hundred apiece, and they'll probably be worth a lot more when they're put in training. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for one or other of them to have damaged itself irretrievably, galloping hell-for-leather round the field with that confounded dog of yours at their heels, and I should have been left with a ruined horse on my hands and two hundred pounds out of pocket. Isn't it only fair—reasonable—that the dog should have a thrashing and get his lesson?"

"It may seem reasonable from your point of view," replied Pamela icily. "But that has nothing to do with me. Tatters is not going to be beaten."

"You really refuse?"

Her head went up.

"Certainly I refuse. I've already said so once."

"I'm sorry, then." With a quick, decisive movement he stopped and, catching hold of Tatters by the scruff of his

neck, dragged him out from his hiding-place. In his other hand he carried a light switch, and before Pamela had quite realized what he was going to do, he was laying the switch smartly about the dog's hindquarters. For a moment she was too utterly astonished to move, and in that short interval Tatters received a brief but thorough thrashing, which, being a game little dog and knowing full well it was no more than he deserved, he took without a whimper. Then, with a cry of anger, Pamela sprang forward and threw out her hand to check the next impending blow. But she was too late. The switch came down and caught her a stinging cut across her arm.

With a muttered curse the man released his hold of Tatters—who, without waiting for further developments, made a bee-line for home as fast as his legs could carry him—and swung round angrily.

"Have I hurt you much?" he demanded gruffly.

Pamela put her injured arm behind her.

"Not in the least, thank you," she replied coldly. "But perhaps—now that you've thrashed *us both*—you'll be satisfied."

A dull red crept up into the man's lean, brown face, but his expression did not soften.

"I'm sorry," he said, with the same brusqueness as before. "But it was entirely your own fault that I hit you. You shouldn't have interfered. Let me look at your arm."

Her only reply to this request was to thrust her arm a little more tightly behind her back.

"I should have thought," she remarked freezingly, "that the person who has the cheek to beat another person's dog is the one who is—'interfering.'"

"Which, in the circumstances, merely shows that you haven't the most elementary knowledge of fair play," he replied easily.

Pamela maintained a furious silence. The man was impossible—aggravating to the last degree. She would have

liked very much to have been able to accuse him of cruelty. But there had been nothing cruel in his handling of Tatters. She was reluctantly forced to admit that. He had merely given the dog a well-deserved punishment, sharp and decisive, nor had the blows administered been in any way brutal or heavy.

"Let me look at your arm," he said once more, dismissing the subject of Tatters' beating. Then, as she shook her head: "You'd better give in. Surely"—with a brief smile—"surely you must have realized by this time that when I make up my mind about a thing I'm not easily turned from my purpose. And I propose to see that arm of yours."

She looked up at him half questioningly, half defiantly. As he met her glance he nodded, as though to emphasize his statement. Slowly, unwillingly, she withdrew her arm from behind her back and held it out for inspection. A long weal, vividly red against its whiteness, ran diagonally from elbow to wrist. In one place the skin had been torn and a little trickle of blood was oozing from it.

A sharp exclamation escaped him.

"That's what cut the skin," he said, indicating a jagged notch near the thick end of the switch which he had been holding. "But it wouldn't have touched Tatters," he added, as though seeking to avert any misjudgment on her part. "It was too high up."

She bent her head.

"Yes, I know it was," she admitted. It was unfortunate that there was no loophole of excuse for taunting him with having been cruel to the dog.

"Well, it had better be bathed at once, as the skin's broken," he pursued in a practical tone of voice. "If you'll come up to the house, I'll do it for you."

"There's not the least need, thank you," she replied ungraciously. "I'll bathe it myself when I get home."

"You're Miss Wayne, aren't you?" he said.

With a look of surprise she assented.

"Then your home's a good deal further off than mine. Mine is only just across this field, so we'll go there."

"You're Mr. Carrington?" There was ice in her voice, but apparently he did not notice it.

"Yes, I'm Blake Carrington," he answered unconcernedly.

He unlatched the gate and held it open for her to pass through, and there was so much assurance in his manner, so complete a certainty that she was going to obey orders and return with him to his house to have her arm bathed, that, much to her own surprise, she found herself meekly accompanying him thither.

Boscowen was a low, two-storied building standing within a belt of firs—a grey, stone house, with a curious air of determined solitariness about it. To Pamela, who had not seen it since it had passed into the hands of its new master, it appeared to have acquired a more definite air of aloofness than it had been wont to wear, as though the inhospitable, unsocial character of the man who now owned it had even communicated itself to the place in which he lived. She shivered a little, involuntarily, as she passed in at the gateway. The very fir-trees seemed to whisper hostilely together over her head. Then her companion threw open a heavy door, which gave immediately upon an old-fashioned raftered living-room, and the ruddy light of a wood-fire crackling on the wide hearth rushed out to greet her, dispelling the eerie feeling of oppression which had momentarily obsessed her.

"Sit down a moment, will you?" said Carrington, carelessly indicating a big easy-chair by the fire. And, without waiting to see whether or no she availed herself of his indifferent invitation, he disappeared through a doorway on the right.

Pamela sat down and proceeded to take stock of the place in which she found herself. It was altogether al-

tered from the kind of room it had been under the Bartlett régime. Her thoughts went back to it as she remembered it then—with a shiny, reddish table in the middle, adorned by a central wool mat on which reposed a crude ormolu and china ornament of appalling dimensions, flanked fore and aft by padded albums containing faded photos of former Bartlett generations, and on the two remaining sides by the family Bible and a copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Straight-backed chairs, upholstered in slippery American cloth, had been wont to stand at nicely balanced intervals against the walls, and on the floor a well-scrubbed linoleum had completely hidden the beautiful old polished oak which now gleamed like a sheet of still, dark water, throwing back a quivering reflection of the fire's dancing flames, save where a couple of dim-hued Persian rugs broke its expanse.

The villainous stone-grey paint with which some vandal had long ago concealed the Jacobean panelling of the walls had been removed and the wood now shone soft and lustrous, like panels of black ivory. In one corner stood a genuine old gate-legged table, while a fine oak dresser ran almost the whole length of one wall, a few bits of wonderful old pottery in warm reds and yellows striking a vivid note of colour against its sombre shelves.

Pamela was conscious of a quick sense of surprise. This was not at all the kind of room she had expected to see. The simplicity of it, the fineness, its carefully tended air, if it meant anything at all, meant that the man who had made it what it was had the fastidious eye of an artist and an expert's knowledge of things rare and precious—with neither of which qualifications would she have been at all disposed to credit the "Carrington person."

At this point her somewhat puzzled musings were interrupted by the reappearance of Carrington himself, a towel slung over his arm and a basin of warm water, smelling faintly of disinfectant, in his hand. Pamela stiffened at

his entrance. She was far from forgiving him at present.

"Now," he said, depositing the bowl on a stool beside her chair. "Hold out your arm, please—over the basin. Yes, like that."

She obeyed, watching him curiously while he deftly bathed and bandaged the injured limb. He must be about two or three and thirty, she thought. It was a lean, dark face that bent intently above her arm, grave almost to sternness, and with a rather bitter curve about the lips. The chin was stubbornly square, and Pamela could imagine that, once this man had taken a decision, nothing short of a spiritual earthquake would induce him to alter it. She liked his hair. It was thick and smooth and very dark—like black satin, she reflected whimsically. It was a pity he was so disagreeable. . . . And then suddenly he looked up and she was struck by the extraordinary blueness of his eyes in the dark setting of his face. But they were strangely hard eyes—mask-like in the impenetrability of their expression.

"Quite comfortable?" he asked, as he finished adjusting the bandage round her arm.

"Quite, thank you," she replied distantly. Even though he had insisted upon trying to repair the damage he had done, there was no particular reason why she should be overflowingly grateful about the matter, especially as she would have preferred to be altogether independent of his ministrations.

"You're not a bit pleased about it, are you?" he commented with faint amusement.

"No," she said indignantly. "Naturally, I'm not. Would you be pleased if someone who had no business to do so thrashed your dog, whether you liked it or not, and incidentally caught you one over the arm in the process?"

"The whole thing from start to finish was your own

fault," he returned, unmoved. "Didn't you see the notice-board saying that no trespassers were allowed?"

"Of course I saw it. "But"—with a little haughty gesture of her head—"no one here calls it *'trespassing'* if one of the Waynes crosses their land. They're usually pleased."

"Are they?" Blake Carrington seemed unimpressed. "Well, I'm an exception—if 'one of the Waynes' is usually accompanied by an unbroken brute like that confounded dog of yours. You know as well as I do that he deserved that hiding—every stroke of it."

"Possibly he did. It's just as well that we don't all—get what we deserve"—with a small, significant curl of her lip.

"Some of us do—and a bit more."

He spoke abruptly, almost as if the words had been jerked out of him unawares, and there was a note of such sharp bitterness in his voice that she glanced at him in surprise. She could have sworn that for an instant the hardness of his eyes had been broken up by something that was surely pain, something that supplicated, but before she could actually determine what it was the fleeting expression was gone and the eyes which met her own were as hard and reticent as before. It was as though a shutter had suddenly dropped, shutting her away from whatever it was which had been almost inadvertently revealed.

"Poor Tatters has had *his* deserts this mornings, anyway," she said lightly, instinctively trying to combat that sombre note which had suddenly thrust itself into the conversation. "We neither of us seem to have been very welcome here."

If she had hoped for any polite disclaimer, she was doomed to disappointment.

"Well, you shouldn't trespass," he returned doggedly. "There are enough notice-boards about to warn people."

"There certainly are," she agreed. "But, as I really came

on purpose to see you, and not for the mere pleasure of trespassing, I didn't pay any attention to them."

"To see me?" He looked at her in genuine surprise. "Why on earth should you come to see me?"

Briefly she explained her errand. At the first mention of the hunt his face darkened and his mouth set itself in a stubborn line of resistance, but she continued undismayed, and wound up with a rather charmingly uttered: "So we hope you'll be nice enough to reverse your decision and consent to our hunting over Boscowen."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," he replied.

"Oh, please——"

Very few people even tried to resist Pamela when she smiled like that. They knew the uselessness of it. But apparently Blake Carrington was an exception to every known rule.

"If you hunt over Boscowen, you do it at your own risk," he said dispassionately. "I warn you that I've put down a good many traps, and I've also strengthened a lot of the hedges with barbed wire."

"But how *awful* of you!" exclaimed Pamela, frankly shocked at such unsportsmanlike behaviour. She had hardly credited the black rumours she had heard respecting Carrington's activities in this direction—they seemed too bad to be true. But it was evident that his misdeeds had not been exaggerated at all, and, far from being ashamed of himself, he appeared thoroughly satisfied.

"Not in the least," he retorted. "I don't want either horses or hounds over my land, and I've taken every precaution to prevent it."

"You have, indeed," she answered, her voice edged with contempt. "But, then, why come into a hunting district at all? We're all keen on hunting here, and the Rakehill is a well-known pack——"

"Very well known, I imagine. The 'Pack of Disgraces,' isn't it?" he commented dryly.

Pamela flushed. On one occasion, after an exceptionally rousing day's sport, some of the hunters had returned in riotous spirits to Rakehill Manor for dinner and the fun had waxed fast and furious. They had kept it up till the small hours of the morning, and a certain sharp-tongued lady, whose husband had made one of the uproarious party and had returned home rather the worse for wear and tear and an injudicious mixture of drinks, had afterwards caustically referred to the Waynes as the "Pack of Disgraces," and the name, having a certain malicious appropriateness, had stuck.

"That was only a joke," said Pamela in defence. "And a bad one at that. Hounds are very popular in the neighbourhood, whatever you may have heard from non-hunting people, and we've always been used to hunting over Boscowen. Don't you think"—persuasively "that it's rather a mistake for a new-comer to set himself against old-established customs?"

Carrington's eyes met hers with a hard brightness in them that, as she afterwards confided to the boys, was as good as a suit of armour.

"Not in the least," he replied. "Why should it be?"

"Well"—tentatively—"no one will want to make friends with you, will they?"

"Which is precisely what I should wish," he retorted. "Haven't I made that clear?"

She flushed scarlet. The snub was so direct and unmistakable. And to Pamela, accustomed as she was to a certain amount of spoiling from the men she met, it came with doubled force. She sprang to her feet.

"You have made it—quite clear," she said, her voice a little unsteady. I'm sorry I've been so slow at understanding."

She had avoided looking at him as she spoke. Otherwise she might have seen his mouth twist queerly, and for an instant that curious bright hardness went out of his eyes.

But the change was so brief as to be almost imperceptible. The next moment his face had resumed its mask of impassivity.

"You're going?" he said, as she turned towards the door.

"Yes, I'm going. I hadn't realized—quite how unwelcome I was." There was a hurt note in her tone, but he seemed oblivious of it. Gravely he accompanied her to the door and opened it, then stood watching her as she made her way down the short drive beneath the fir-trees. When she had quite disappeared from sight, he turned slowly back into the house, and for a long time after she had gone he sat staring into the fire, the expression of his face untranslatable.

CHAPTER IV

THE PACK OF DISGRACES

IT was an irreproachable hunting morning. Overhead stretched a pearl-grey sky which gave promise of deepening later into clear autumn blue, while a thin veil of mist still hung above the surface of the ground, touching every leaf and blade of grass with a faint moisture that predicted a good scenting day.

A certain liveliness prevailed at Rakehill Manor. Williams, his shabby black coat shiny with age, was bustling hither and thither, carrying packets of sandwiches into the hall, brushing hats, helping Toby and Bubbles into their top-boots, and generally trying to do two men's work at one and the same moment. But he was quite used to it—especially on those occasions when hounds were meeting.

Butler in the good old days when there had been plenty of money to run the Manor as it should be run, he was now a kind of general factotum, combining in one the duties of butler, footman, and boot-boy—and occasionally, in sudden emergencies, of cook and kitchenmaid as well. He had worshipped his old master with a simple loyalty that remained unchanged by any reverse of fortune. Born in one of the cottages on the estate, he and Harvard had been boys together, climbed the same trees and rifled the same orchards, and when Wayne's fortunes had begun to turn downward and, owing to reckless extravagance and increasing debts, money had become scarce, he had declined to quit his post. And now that his master was dead, he gave the same unstinted devotion to the three children he had left behind.

Often he shook his head over their wild behaviour, and sometimes in private he even ventured upon a mild rebuke or caution. But in public he would hear no word against them. The Waynes of Rakehill were sacrosanct, whatever they might choose to do.

On a hunting morning he felt justly proud of his charges. Whatever else there was no money for, it was always forthcoming in the sacred cause of sport, and Pamela and her brothers looked three as well-turned-out young people as could be desired when they gathered in a cheery group on the Manor steps, preparatory to making a start.

Outside, the hounds clustered restlessly on the broad gravel drive, while a couple of stablemen were holding the three horses in readiness. Now and then the crack of the whip's hunting-lash cut the air as he called this or that hound to order. Toby looked at his watch impatiently.

"If Loo doesn't turn up in two minutes we shall have to start without him," he observed. "Otherwise we shall be late at Trelyan Cross. And I've never been late for a meet yet," he added with legitimate pride.

"He'll turn up all right," replied Pamela confidently. As she spoke the horses pricked their ears to the sound of cantering hoofs approaching up the drive, and a minute later Lucian Gale, mounted on a rakish-looking chestnut, came in sight.

His dark, eager face turned at once towards Pamela, as he sprang from the saddle. Slipping the reins over his arm, he came up to her.

"Hail to the day!" he exclaimed gaily. "This is the great occasion when that Carrington chap is to be taught that he can't obstruct the Rakehill Hunt in the performance of its duty, isn't it?"

Pamela smiled.

"It all depends on whether our fox goes away towards Trethry."

"Which I hope to heaven he will," breathed Toby de-

voutly, as he gathered up the reins and swung himself into the saddle. "The sooner the fellow realizes that he can't dictate to us the better."

A few minutes later, with a clatter of hoofs and cracking of whips, they were off, Toby and Bubbles leading, while Pamela and Loo dropped behind the pack, leisurely bringing up the rear.

"So you couldn't do any good with him the other day, Pam?" inquired Loo, as they trotted along.

"Not a bit." She smiled reminiscently. "I'm afraid we began badly. Tatters disgraced himself by chasing a couple of young thoroughbreds, which didn't exactly smooth matters. And Mr. Carrington is a most determined individual. Adamant is a yielding feather-bed compared with him."

"I suppose he's a bit of a second-rater—new rich or something, and wants to show that he's cock of the walk."

She shook her head.

"He's very well off, I should think, judging by the way he has furnished Boscowen. But he's not a second-rater." She spoke slowly, as though forced against her will to acknowledge the fact. "Not in the least a second-rater, Loo."

"Well, what's he like, then?"

She laughed a little.

"He's extremely downright and outspoken. He practically told me in so many words that my presence at Boscowen was neither desired nor welcome."

"Ungracious devil!" commented Lucian. "Well"—cheerfully—"that being so, I shall have no compunction whatever in knocking his gates and fences about if they get in my way. It'll serve him jolly well right for daring to treat you like that."

Pamela held out her hand to him.

"You're a good pal, Loo," she smiled.

He took her hand in his and brushed it with his lips before relinquishing it.

"I'd a long sight rather be something else," he answered, his voice roughening a little. "But I suppose it's no damn good my hoping for it."

"No damn good whatever," she returned seriously. "Dear old Loo, if it had been, I'd have said 'yes' ages ago. I'm not a bit the sort to keep a man dangling around waiting just for the fun of the thing."

Loo squared his shoulders and sat well back into the saddle.

"Oh, well," he said. "I shall continue to dangle round. Not because you buoy me up with any false hopes," he added with a half-bitter, half-whimsical smile. "But because I prefer dangling to being right off the map. So that's that."

As though by mutual consent, they quickened their horses' pace and, overtaking the hounds, joined Toby and Bubbles, and the four of them rode on together.

They reached Trelyan Cross to find that quite a big field had gathered for the opening meet, and during the few minutes' wait arose a merry buzz of conversation, punctuated by the impatient stamping of horses' hoofs, the occasional deep-throated growl of one or other of the hounds, or the sharp crack of a hunting-whip.

Very early in the proceedings Bubbles had detached himself from the Manor party and ridden up to a slender, dark-eyed girl, extraordinarily well mounted on a bright bay Irish hunter, who welcomed him with such obvious delight that it called forth more than one rather acid comment.

"That Barstein girl's doing her best to get off with Bubbles Wayne, isn't she?" remarked one woman to another.

The other, a grey-haired woman, whose neat, well-brushed habit showed signs of anno domini, nodded rather sadly:

"Yes. It's a thousand pities. He's much too charming

a person to be squandered on the daughter of a horrid little Jew."

The first speaker shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, well, it's the way of things nowadays. That 'horrid little Jew,' as you call him, owns about half Cranruth, and he and his daughter are gradually pushing their way in amongst all the decent people in the neighbourhood."

"One wonders how it's done," murmured the other.

"Oh, no, one doesn't, my dear woman. One knows, We're most of us the new poor these days, and Barstein, who started life as a money-lender pure and simple, holds mortgages on half the properties round here. So we all invite him to dinner and his daughter to dances. I've had to ask them myself, because my own husband has borrowed from him. Ugh! It makes me sick." And with a touch on the reins she moved her horse forward a few paces so that the sight of Bubbles chatting gaily away with the obnoxious Barstein's daughter need no longer offend her vision.

The uncharitable remarks of the other women in the hunt mattered very little, however, to Vera Barstein. Behind her liquid dark eyes lurked an extremely shrewd and practical brain, and she was perfectly well aware that if she succeeded in marrying the much-beloved Bubbles, there wasn't a hostess in the neighbourhood who would close her doors against her. They would never do without their Bubbles, and, once she was his wife, they would be compelled to include her in any invitation he might receive.

To give her due, however, it must be admitted that Bubbles' social value was only a contributory factor in her private determination to marry him. Small and lithe and dark herself, she had fallen headlong in love with his big, fair beauty the first time she had encountered him. On the occasion in question, Bubbles had motored in to the neighbouring town of Cranruth, which lay about fifteen miles distant from Rakehill Manor, and had come into

Barstein's office in connection with a small financial transaction which had been of considerable importance to him at the moment. Since then, other and more far-reaching transactions of a similar nature had taken place between the Waynes and Barstein.

Vera had happened to be calling for her father at his office on this occasion of Bubbles' first visit there, and had let fall some small parcels she was carrying, which Bubbles politely picked up and returned to her. A few words had been exchanged, and so an acquaintance was begun which she had since carefully fostered. Love, with her, was a curious compound of passion and opportunism. When she and Bubbles were alone together the former prevailed and taught her all the ways of a woman with the man she wishes to attract, while in his absence she was clear-sightedly able to sum up to a nicety the advantages which would accrue from marriage with him.

"I'm so glad the hunting season's come round again, aren't you, Mr. Wayne?" she said, as he reined in his horse beside her.

"Indeed I am," he assented heartily. "That's a new gee you're riding, isn't it?"

"Yes"—patting the animal's neck. "Do you like him?"

"I should rather think I do!" answered Bubbles, who knew a good horse when he saw one. "You're a very lucky young woman, you know, Miss Barstein, to own a topper like that."

"Well, you see, father doesn't mind what he pays, as long as I have what I like." She glanced at him sideways from under a sweep of black lashes, entirely unconscious that her remark, calculated to make a desirable impression on Bubbles, had produced a quite opposite effect. He winced a little mentally, although he rejoined easily enough:

"If he knows his job, I should say that horse is worth pretty much anything you like to pay for him. He's a

corker. Hullo!"—as the huntsman's horn shrilled through the air. "Hounds are moving off. We'd better be getting along, hadn't we?"

Miss Barstein nodded. She was quite ready to "get along" provided she did so in Bubbles' company, and as they rode off together, she felt that the morning had begun most auspiciously and inwardly determined to keep Bubbles at her side for the remainder of the day. If he showed signs of straying, she could always tell him she was counting on him to give her a lead, and she knew his good nature well enough to feel confident this would suffice to keep him near her.

As luck would have it, the first fox found, contrary to custom, bolted off in the Cranruth direction instead of towards Trethry, so that it seemed as though no legitimate necessity for crossing Boscowen Farm would arise. Lucian Gale grinned rather ruefully across at Pamela as, after a gorgeous forty-minute burst, hounds checked abruptly in the vicinity of a small wood.

"Evidently the devil's fighting for our friend, Blake Carrington," he observed dryly. "It looks as if he's not going to be taught his lesson to-day."

Pamela smiled.

"No, I don't think he is. We're not likely to run that way now." And she was not quite sure whether in her heart she was glad or sorry. Just then a deep-throated bay from one of the leading hounds announced that he had picked up the scent once more, then came a shout, "Gone away," and a minute later everything was forgotten as hounds streamed ahead with the field racing hell-for-leather behind them. It was a glorious run, and as Pamela flew along with the wind of her going singing past her ears, she forgot all about Carrington and his stubbornness and his hideous notice-boards, and was conscious only of that blur of white and tan bodies streaking ahead in the

distance, of the thud of galloping hoofs, and of Loo, bent low in his saddle, a dozen yards ahead of her.

They killed near an old deserted mill-house, on the hither side of Cranruth, and after that followed a couple of those barren hours when one ate one's lunch and pottered about gossiping with all and sundry while the hounds drew several coverts without success.

By the middle of the afternoon the hunt had returned on its tracks towards Trelyan, and, almost hopeless of finding again, Toby was on the point of calling off his hounds and taking them home when first one and then another gave tongue.

"They've found!"

Once more they were off, and this time the fox headed straight for Trethry, cutting across Boscowen Farm. Hounds followed, as did also the Master and a handful of others, but quite a number of the field, with that odd, surly kind of deference people pay to an official-looking notice-board, avoided the farm and rattled along a lane which skirted its borders, hoping to come up with the hounds again, albeit a few minutes later than would otherwise have been the case. It was just at this unpropitious moment that a real hunting-field misfortune claimed Pamela as a victim. Her saddle-girth slipped. She reined in her horse resignedly, waving her hand to Loo to urge him onward.

"You go on!" she called. "My girth's slipped. I'll catch up."

"Rot!" was all Lucian's comment. He pulled up and, dismounting, proceeding to tighten the girth for her. Quivering with excitement, her horse refused at first to stand still, but sidled maddeningly backwards and forwards, so that several precious moments elapsed before Loo could adjust the band satisfactorily.

"I wish you had gone on as I told you to," said Pamela,

distressed. "I'm afraid we shan't get up with hounds again. They're running at such a pace."

An impish light of amusement gleamed in Loo's eyes as he remounted.

"We'll do it all right—if we cut across Boscowen! It's that or nothing. Come on!"

Pamela came on, and a minute later they were galloping over Carrington's broad acres, heading for a gateway by means of which they knew that they could considerably shorten the distance which separated them from the hounds. Suddenly Pamela uttered a sharp cry.

"Look out, Loo! Stop! There's barbed wire all along the top."

Loo almost broke his horse's jaw, but managed to pull up just in the nick of time, and he flung himself out of the saddle, his face dark with anger.

"Confound the fellow?" he burst out furiously.

"What can we do?" asked Pamela, eyeing rather blankly the two strands of barbed wire which ran from one gate-post to the other.

"Do?" Again that look of Puckish amusement showed in Loo's face, chasing away the fury which had distorted it a moment earlier. "Do? Why, cut it, of course. I came prepared for this little game. Hold my horse a minute, will you?"

Chuckling with delight, he whipped out a pair of strong wire-cutters from his pocket and neatly snipped the strands at either end.

"Now," he triumphed, glancing over his shoulder to Pamela, "I'll open the gate for you."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" said a voice, and simultaneously a lean, brown hand closed like a vice over the latch.

Loo turned sharply round to see Carrington himself standing on the other side of the gate. He had heard sounds which warned him that the hunt was sweeping over

his territory, and although he had hurried across the fields too late to stop the main body of trespassers, he had arrived in time to assert the principle of proprietary rights in so far as two members of the hunt, at least, were concerned.

"Oh, don't talk rot!" protested Loo. "You can't hold us up like that."

"I can, and I will," returned Carrington grimly.

Loo glared at him ferociously.

"But, good heavens, man! Don't you see that there's a lady waiting to pass?"

Carrington looked unconcernedly past him to where Pamela sat on her horse, holding the reins of Loo's wicked-looking chestnut.

"I see that Miss Wayne is there," he replied coolly. "She knows my rules."

"Damn your rules!" burst out Loo violently. "Look here, if you don't stand aside and let me open that gate, I'll set my horse at it and break the bally thing to smithereens."

Carrington's only reply was to thrust a strong wooden staple which he carried through the iron loop of the latch and clench his fingers round it. Loo whirled round, ran back as hard as he could to where Pamela was holding his horse, and hurled himself into the saddle.

"I'll teach that fool!" he exclaimed. "That gate'll give. It's half rotten. You follow me—instantly, mind!"

Pamela nodded. Her eyes were blazing. At that moment she would cheerfully have followed Loo through fire and water if by so doing she could have got the better of Blake Carrington.

She watched Loo set his horse at the gate, saw the chestnut gather itself together for the jump. . . At the same instant it seemed to her that Carrington slipped from his place by the gate-post and stepped forward, his arm upraised.

She could not tell what happened next, as for a moment all her attention was demanded by her own horse, who, seeing the chestnut in front, was fighting wildly for his head. But she heard a shout from Loo as his horse rose to the gate: "Come *on,* Pam!" Followed a thunderous rattle of hoofs against the topmost bar, the shattering sound of splintered wood, and he was over. Simultaneously Carrington's tall figure seemed to crumple up. . . .

The chestnut pecked on landing, recovered itself, and tore across the next field like a mad thing, while Pamela's own mount, almost out of hand, rushed the broken gate, cleared it, and raced in pursuit. As they flew forward she managed to throw a quick glance behind her. Carrington was lying prone on the ground, one leg curiously doubled underneath him.

CHAPTER V

DEAD FIRES

WITH some difficulty Pamela steadied her horse and at last brought him to a standstill. The sight of Carrington's prone figure on the ground beside the gateway had given her a curiously sick feeling. She realized instantly what had happened. Loo must have knocked him sideways as he took the gate. He was scarcely to blame. Carrington had practically asked for it by planting himself immediately in front of the gate at the precise moment the chestnut jumped it. All the same, it was with an effort that Pamela forced herself, after that first fleeting glance, to turn back in order to investigate the damage. She was filled with a dreadful fear that Carrington might be seriously injured. If he were, she would have to go for help, as, although she had called to Loo, he had been too far ahead to hear her, and had now vanished out of sight.

And then, before she was more than half-way across the field, she saw Carrington scramble up from the ground and bend forward, apparently to secure the latch of the gate more firmly. The silhouette of his tall, supple figure stood out clearly against the grey of the afternoon sky. She was conscious of a keen sense of relief—disproportionately keen, seeing that the man was nothing to her. Less than nothing, she told herself, since she rather disliked him than otherwise. Still, she was just as glad that Loo hadn't injured him, and, somewhat disposed to laugh at her fears of a moment before, she wheeled her horse round once more and galloped away in the direction in which she had seen Loo disappear.

She met him a couple of fields further on, returning in search of her, his face rather white and worried-looking. It cleared instantly at the sight of her.

"Thank goodness!" he ejaculated. "I was just getting the wind up about you. What on earth have you been doing?"

She laughed.

"I went back to pick up the wounded," she explained. "*Your* wounded. Really, Loo, you rather overdo things! Not content with trespassing over someone else's property and generally smashing up the gates and things, you add insult to injury by knocking down the owner himself."

"What? No! Did I really? I thought he nipped out of the way just in time."

Pamela shook her head.

"No. He was shot out of the way by brute force."

"Hurt?" queried Loo laconically.

"Not much, evidently. I went back, but as I saw that he had picked himself up all right and was busy attending to the latch of the gate, I came to the conclusion that first-aid was not required."

"Well"—Loo surveyed the landscape discontentedly—"I'm afraid we've completely lost the hounds—thanks to Carrington."

Pamela tilted her head in a listening attitude.

"I'm not so sure," she said. "I believe I hear them—away over there." She pointed to the left, and even as she spoke the pricked, quivering ears of the horses endorsed her words. Evidently the hunt had come round almost in a circle and hounds were now going to draw the Boscowen coverts.

"You're right!" Loo whooped his satisfaction. "Come along. Let's cut after them."

He was off at a gallop, and Pam, touching her horse lightly with her hunting-crop, was off after him like a flash. Across a meadow, over a stretch of ploughed land, and

into another meadow they sped. Here several dairy cows were grazing leisurely, and as the two riders dashed into the field and came racing towards them they scattered hastily. One of them, cow-like, made a bad error of judgment, and getting herself directly in line with the course the horses were taking, lost her head, and galloped lumberingly in front of them as fast as her legs could carry her. Then, finding that they were overtaking her, she veered towards the hedge and disappeared abruptly into the ditch which skirted it.

The cow having blundered herself out of the way, Loo and Pamela made a spurt, and a few minutes later, to their intense satisfaction, they came up with the hounds once more. After this it looked as though their series of misadventures had come to an end. Hounds had lost the fox which had originally brought them across Boscowen Farm, but now they found again very quickly, and a fast run of an hour and twenty minutes, winding up with a kill in the open, brought the day's sport to an end.

The Rakehill Manor party returned home tired but extremely happy, and rather entertained by the ironical fact that a fox found on the forbidden Boscowen coverts had given them the best run of the day.

"I think," remarked Toby complacently at dinner, "that we've taught Mr. Carrington his lesson. He's had quite a gate or two broken today. *We* smashed one. Some woman's horse started kicking like blazes, and of course every one tried to get out of the way quick. We were rather wedged in near a gateway at the moment, so that the horses crowded up against it. And"—with a grin—"it gave way under pressure."

"Carrington 'll have to do the same," observed Bubbles, helping himself generously to apple fritters. "Give way under pressure."

Pamela looked across at him reflectively.

"I wonder if he will," she said slowly.

"Well, I'm hanged!"

It was at breakfast the following morning that Toby gave utterance to the above remark, and the tone of his voice was expressive of such unbounded wrath and astonishment that Pamela broke off from the perusal of her own correspondence to inquire what was the matter.

"Read that," said Toby shortly, pushing a letter across the table to her. "*And* that." A second sheet followed.

Pamela's eyes dropped first of all to the signature of the letter. A faint flush rose in her cheeks as she saw by whom it had been written. In silence she read it through from the beginning. It was extremely brief and to the point.

"T. Wayne, Esq., M.F.H.

"Dear Sir"—the letter ran. "Enclosed you will find the account for the damage done to my property yesterday by the Rakehill Hunt. As you are fully aware that I have refused permission for my land to be included in the country you hunt, you will doubtless be prepared to indemnify me out of your Damage Fund for the loss I have sustained.

"Yours faithfully,
"Blake Carrington."

"That's his bill," snorted Toby, jerking his head in the direction of the second sheet of paper. Pamela laid down the letter and picked up the sheet indicated.

"'*To two broken gates and barbed wire cut, five pounds,*'" she read aloud. "'*To one pedigree cow compulsorily destroyed on account of broken leg, one hundred guineas. Total, one hundred and ten pounds.*' Toby, I never heard of anything so disgraceful!" she burst out indignantly. "The cad! Fancy sending in a bill—like a tradesman! Besides, *we* didn't kill his precious cow!"

"I like his prices too," observed Bubbles. "Who

says his bally old cow was worth a hundred guineas? We might estimate her value at something considerably less, I imagine."

Toby shook his head regretfully.

"No. I noticed his dairy cows. They were good 'uns —pedigree, all right."

"I shall go straight over and see him about this," declared Pamela, tapping the "bill" with an angry but extremely pretty forefinger. "It'—it's outrageous of him!"

"Will you really, Pam?" Toby regarded her with lazy relief. "Do. The Damage Fund has quite enough to pay for in the ordinary way. All the hens round here appear to be of inestimable value—the kind that lays two or three eggs a day, I suppose."

Pamela laughed. Then her face sobered again.

"I really didn't think Mr. Carrington would be so horrid about things," she said. "And I don't feel a bit sorry now that Loo knocked him down," she added viciously. "He deserves a few bruises."

She rose from the table, intending to set out for Boscowen Farm immediately, while her anger still glowed hotly within her. But, as luck would have it, everything seemed to conspire against the putting of her plan into action. First, the cook delayed her with a long tale of woe concerning the delinquencies of Sarah Jane, the kitchen maid. Either she or Sarah Jane must go, she declared, and it took Pamela nearly an hour's tactful persuasion to pacify her and to restore peace once more between the autocrat of the kitchen and her henchwoman.

Then Toby came in to tell her that the horse she had hunted yesterday had fallen lame.

"It may be only a touch of rheumatism," he said. "But when we ran him out this morning, he was dead lame in his off fore."

A visit to the stables followed automatically, and no sooner had she returned to the house than Mr. Penwarden,

the rector of the parish, was announced. He had called to collect for the Church Restoration Fund, and he proceeded to describe the improvements he hoped to effect at such length that the morning was nearly over by the time he at last took his departure.

So that it was not until the afternoon that Pamela was finally enabled to start on her pilgrimage to Boscowen, and by that time the first fine frenzy of her righteous indignation had evaporated a little. She was even conscious of a faint sense of trepidation as, skirting the oaken side-door by which she had entered the house when she had accompanied Carrington thither, she approached what was obviously the front door and tugged at the old-fashioned bell. It clanged loudly through the house, and presently the door was opened by a sour-visaged, middle-aged maidservant who regarded Pamela with an extremely hostile air, as though her presence on the doorstep were a species of insult.

"And what may you be wanting?" she demanded truculently.

Pamela flushed.

"Is Mr. Carrington at home?" she asked, ignoring the direct question.

"He is," returned the woman shortly. "But if you've come collecting for anything, you may save your pains. Mr. Carrington never gives at the door."

A faint smile tilted Pamela's mouth. Apparently the rector had been here before her.

"But I've *not* come collecting for anything," she explained, trying to be patient with this excessively ungracious handmaiden. "I—I've called to see Mr. Carrington."

"The master never sees visitors," retorted the female Cerberus, unmoved, and made as though to close the door in this particular visitor's face.

"Oh, please"—Pamela intervened quickly, uncon-

sciously raising her voice a little. "I think he will see me. Will you ask him? Say that it's Miss Wayne."

"Kezia!"

A door on the right of the small square hall was standing ajar, and through this a man's voice, which Pamela recognized as that of Blake Carrington, called imperatively. The woman, muttering to herself, responded to the summons by disappearing behind the partly opened door. A low-voiced colloquy followed of which Pamela caught a scattered sentence here and there.

". . . feather-brained young hussy from the Manor. . . . 'Twill only worrit you, sir . . . tire you out." Evidently Kezia had no mind that her master should be troubled with visitors. Then came Carrington's voice, flecked with a note of amusement: "You're like an old hen cackling round a chicken, Kezia." Another brief, low-voiced argument from Kezia, followed by a sharp, authoritative: "Show Miss Wayne in here."

A minute later the woman returned and, grudgingly inviting Pamela to "Come this way," conducted her into the same room as that in which she had been on the occasion of her previous visit to the farm. This time a big Chesterfield couch was drawn up near the fire, upon which Carrington was lying.

"Good afternoon, Miss Wayne," he said, a slightly ironical inflexion tinging the politeness of his tones. I'm sorry I can't get up to receive you, but I've unluckily sprained my ankle."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" exclaimed Pamela spontaneously, as she shook hands. And then her colour suddenly deepened as an awful thought presented itself to her mind. "Did you—how did it happen?" she asked waveringly.

"It happened when that extremely hot-headed young friend of yours thought fit to ride me down on my own property," he replied.

"Oh!"—she hesitated, her face scarlet—"I'm most awfully sorry, Mr. Carrington," she burst out at last, feeling more uncomfortable than she had thought it possible to feel under the cool, derisive glance his blue eyes levelled at her. "And I'm sure Loo—Mr. Gale would be, too, if he knew."

"Are you? I'm not so sure of that. As a matter of fact, I expect he'd feel he'd got a bit of his own back."

"Is it"—she glanced contritely at the injured foot, the ankle of which was firmly bandaged—"is it very painful?"

"It's bearable, thank you," he replied gravely. "And now may I ask the object of your visit? It was certainly not to make kind inquiries after my health, since you were unaware that I was in a hospital. Won't you sit down?" he added in his customary indifferent manner.

He indicated a chair on the other side of the hearth and she sat down obediently, although acutely conscious of the lack of warmth in the invitation. There was a carelessly contemptuous edge to everything he said which was like the light flicking of a whip, and Pamela, accustomed as she was to being rather spoilt and deferred to by her own menfolk and their friends, was stung by the cool, slighting tone this man elected to adopt towards her. The resentment it inspired gave her back her poise. Besides, she had promised Toby that she would straighten matters out, and even though the sight of that bandaged ankle filled her with inward relenting, she felt that she must disregard it and stick to her point.

"You are quite right," she said stiffly. "I came to see you about a totally different matter. About this." And she unfolded the sheet of notepaper upon which Carrington had made out the amount owing to him for damage done by the Hunt.

"This?" he returned interrogatively. "What is—'this'?"

"It's the list of charges you have sent in to the Master of Hounds—to my brother. I know, of course, that some gates were broken. But the cow?"

"Oh, yes, the cow. When you and your friend stampeded my dairy cattle, she fell into a ditch, broke her leg, and had to be destroyed. I suppose"—with a twist of his mouth—"you don't expect *me* to bear the loss, do you?"

"Naturally, the Hunt is always prepared to pay for damage done." Pamela spoke with dignity. "Within reason, of course. But this seems an absurdly high price for a cow."

"It was a valuable cow," he replied with equal seriousness.

"It must have been," she returned tartly. "And then—five pounds for a wooden bar or so to a couple of gates! And for a bit of barbed wire!" she proceeded, her indignation rising. "Why, the barbed wire might have cut a horse frightfully badly. Would you have been prepared to pay damages if it had, may I ask?"

"Certainly I shouldn't," he replied with energy. "I can put up barbed wire on my own fences if I choose to. I took the trouble to warn you it was there, so that if after that you liked to take the risk of ruining your horses over it, it's entirely your affair, not mine."

Pamela was silent a moment. The man was so aggravatingly, incontrovertibly within his rights.

"We consider," she said at last, "my brother—and all of us—that your charges are absurd—extortionate."

The word "extortionate" ought to make him wince, she thought. But it didn't.

"On the contrary," he maintained. "The bill is a very reasonable one."

"Reasonable!"

"Extremely reasonable"—sardonically. "You will observe that I've made no charge for my own injuries."

Once more the colour flowed into Pamela's cheeks, and her head drooped.

"No," she admitted in a stifled voice. "No. I know." Suddenly she lifted her eyes to his face. "I'm—I'm *awfully* sorry about your ankle," she said impulsively. "Do believe that."

"Are you?" He regarded her silently for a moment or two. Then he said speculatively and as though the fact rather surprised him: "Yes, I really believe you are."

Again a silence fell between them, so long a silence that Pamela thought the subject was finished. All at once, however, he spoke again.

"Would it please—you—if I reduced the sum total?" There was the faintest emphasis on the word "you."

She smiled.

"Why, of course it would," she said. "The Hunt Damage Fund has so many calls on it that squaring up everything generally means that Toby has to pay quite a good deal out of his own pocket. And"—candidly—"poor Toby's pockets aren't very deep."

"You're frank, anyway," he answered, a gleam of amusement passing over his face.

She nodded.

"Of course I am." Adding with a little ripple of laughter: "Besides, it would be no use being anything else. Every one for miles round knows that we're always more or less on the verge of blue ruin."

He laughed outright at the ingenuous confession.

"It doesn't seem to worry you overmuch, anyway," he commented. Then he said abruptly: "Give me that paper—the 'account rendered.'"

Rather wonderingly she handed it across to him. Was

he going to remit part of the amount—or add a further item for personal injuries? He scribbled something across it and returned it to her with a brief smile.

"Give that to your brother," he said.

She glanced down at it curiously. Traversing the list of items in a firm, masculine hand sprawled the single word, "Cancelled," with beneath it Carrington's initials. She gave a little gasp of surprise.

"Do you mean this?" she asked.

"Yes—on one condition. At least"—he corrected himself quickly—"it's not a condition. It's a request. Stay and have tea with me."

Pamela bent her head to hide a fugitive smile.

"But I understood visitors were taboo at Boscowen Farm."

He nodded.

"So they are," he returned gravely. "But every rule has to be proved by exception. This is the exception to prove my rule—if you will let it be?"

There was something extraordinarily winning in his manner as he spoke, and Pamela felt herself yielding to it. The stern individual who had confronted her at the gate on the occasion when Tatters had disgraced himself by chasing horses, the unwilling host of half an hour before, lashing her with the fine, ironical inflexions of his voice, was gone, and in his place here was someone disconcertingly disarming. There was an elusive boyishness about him as he made his request which took years from his age.

"Will you?" he repeated.

She smiled across at him.

"Yes, if—if you're sure you want me to."

"I'm quite sure. Besides," he added, "it's giving you the opportunity of performing a Christian duty."

"Is it? Which one?"

"Visiting the sick and afflicted, of course. Do you

mind—I hate to bother you, but it's a long job if I attempt it myself—do you mind ringing that bell over there?"

She rose and complied with his request, and when Kezia appeared in answer to the summons he ordered tea, adding, as though it were the most commonplace happening in the world: "Miss Wayne is remaining to tea." Kezia's face, as she departed kitchenwards, was a study of conflicting emotions.

When she returned and proceeded to arrange the tea-table at Carrington's side, according to her invariable custom, he checked her with another abrupt: "Miss Wayne will pour out tea." And then he began to grumble at the plainness of the fare provided.

"Have we no—'fancy cakes,' I think you call them, Kezia?" he demanded, regarding with extreme disfavour the good brown home-made cake, glistening with raisins, that occupied the place of honour. "Little odd-shaped affairs with violets and cherries and things on the top?"

Kezia stared.

"No, sir, we haven't," she replied stonily. "You never so much as look at them kind of things."

"Don't I?"

"No, sir, you don't. I made you some once and you throwed them into the fire. I suppose"—and her hard little boot-button eyes softened incredibly—"I suppose you figured out that I'd think you'd eaten them all up and enjoyed them. But I found bits of 'em half burned in the grate next morning." And with that she stalked out of the room.

Carrington turned to Pamela with laughter in his eyes.

"I apologize, Miss Wayne. I'm afraid I'm the culprit. You see, we are not used to having beautiful ladies to tea at Boscowen."

"Why not?" she asked, flashing the question at him.

"Why not?" His face hardened a little. "Oh"—lightly—"because angels of light don't visit the realms of darkness. I told you to-day, your visit—is an exception that proves the rule." Then, as though to check the question which he divined to be hovering on her lips, he went on quickly: "Now will you give yourself—and me—a cup of tea, please?"

She obeyed, secretly wondering at the swift changes in his moods. Glancing round the room, she discovered a small table which she brought to the side of his couch, deftly arranging on it his cup and saucer and plate.

"Hot buttered toast?" she queried, tendering a dish piled up with crisp, golden-brown slices. "It's worth a dozen of the 'fancy cakes' you were agitating for just now, you know."

"This," observed Carrington, allowing himself to be waited upon with obvious satisfaction, "quite reconciles me to a broken ankle or so. I feel rather like an Eastern potentate. I'm afraid"—regretfully—"there must be something of the Sultan concealed somewhere or other in my make-up."

"There is in most men's," retorted Pamela. "If it doesn't manifest itself in liking to be waited on hand and foot, it does in trying to domineer over people. You seem to have got it both ways," she added mischievously.

"Thank you. When I want an undeniable reference as to my character, I shall know to whom to apply."

She shook her head.

"No," she said reflectively. "You're—two people, I think. And I should never know for which of the two I was giving the character."

"'Within my earthly temple there's a crowd: there's one of us that's humble, one that's proud,'" he quoted dryly.

"And is there 'one that's broken-hearted for his sins?'" asked Pamela, taking up the quotation and continuing it. She spoke half laughingly, but the smile vanished abruptly from her face as she saw the sudden change her light-hearted question had provoked in his. The blue eyes, that had been smiling across at her, became all at once hard and bitter and infinitely weary.

"It's superfluous to be broken-hearted," he said quietly. "One is damned eternally for one's sins—in this world, at any rate. That's quite sufficient."

"Oh, no." Instinctively she sought to combat the bleak pessimism of the speech. "You don't believe that. One couldn't go on through life if one believed that."

"One *has* to go on through life. You're not given any choice—unless, of course, you take the coward's way out of it."

"But—but we're not punished like that—always, eternally," she persisted.

"Aren't we? Some poor devils are. A single mistake, one false step, can blast a whole life."

He spoke so hardly, with such an undercurrent of utter cynicism, that Pamela felt convinced this was no mere generalization. The man was speaking out of the depths of some bitter inner consciousness. His implacable conviction had been somehow ground into him by the actual happenings of life itself. She was conscious of a sudden warm rush of pity.

"I don't believe it!" she exclaimed earnestly. "Mistakes, even sins, aren't meant to count against us like that. One can always begin all over again."

He shook his head.

"Not always." He stared broodingly into the fire, where the flames leaped upward from the logs amid a flurry of golden sparks. "When a fire has once burned very low, it can't be made to burn again. It's no more

than a handful of useless red embers on an empty hearth —dead."

"A fire is never dead while the ashes are still red." The answer came like a flash.

"Where did you get that from?" he asked curiously. "It sounds like a quotation."

"It is. From some verses I once read. The poem was called 'Hope.' I've forgotten the rest of it, but one verse stuck in my memory as something to hang on to if ever things should become particularly depressing or difficult. Listen."

In a low voice, a little nervously because of the bitter blue eyes which were regarding her so intently, she repeated the lines:

"No race is over till the last yard's run,
No game is ever lost—until it's won,
A fire is never dead
While the ashes are still red,
Nor the sun set in the skies until the day is done."

"Don't you think it's true?" she said at last, as he made no comment.

He smiled—a smile of peculiar sweetness that momentarily obliterated the hard, reckless lines about his mouth.

"I think you're an optimist," he said with unwonted gentleness. "Hold on to that belief—as long as you can."

She nodded.

"I mean to." Then, glancing towards the clock, she went on quickly: "I must be going home now. Thank you ever so much for being so decent over the—the cow."

She got up from her chair as she spoke and then was aware that he, too, was making an effort to rise.

"Ah, don't!" Hastily she tried to stop him, but she was too late. With the aid of a walking-stick, which was

leaning against the couch in readiness for just such emergencies, he had succeeded, and was standing upright with his weight resting upon his sound foot while he supported himself with one hand on the chimneypiece.

"Shall I come and see you again?" she asked. "You're rather on my conscience, you know"—with a significant glance at his bandaged ankle.

The offer was made so simply, so spontaneously, that there was no misunderstanding it. She was obviously just girlishly contrite over the hurt he had received and anxious to make reparation. He regarded her for a moment in silence.

"I believe you'd really do it," he said at last, slowly.

Pamela's eyes opened wide.

"Why, of course I would."

He was silent, an odd complexity of thought visible in his face. It was as if he were hovering between two courses. All at once his jaw set itself as though he had made his choice.

"No," he said. "It has been very good of you to stay to tea and cheer a sick man as you have done. But there is no need for me to trespass any further on your good nature."

The stilted phrases fell flatly on Pamela's ears, and she stared at him in bewilderment. He had spoken like someone reciting a lesson which had been carefully committed to memory.

"No need?" She repeated the words doubtfully. Then suddenly, as she thought she gathered his meaning, her face flamed scarlet. "Do you mean," she said in a stifled voice, "that you don't want me to come any more?"

"What I want has nothing to do with the matter," he returned, his tones edged with the familiar bitterness that made his voice such an unhappy one. "But—you must not come again. I ought never to have let you

stay in the first instance. It was pure egotism on my part—that Sultan part of me, you know"—with a faint smile. "I—wanted it, and I quite forgot that angels of light can't visit the denizens of darkness without risk of soiling their white robes."

"I don't think I understand," said Pamela, standing before him with her hands loosely clasped in front of her. Standing so, with her cropped hair and slender boyish figure, she looked very young and childish. She might have boasted no more than seventeen instead of the actual twenty-two years to which the register in the old parish church at Trelyan bore witness.

He smiled faintly.

"Where have you been brought up? In this material old world—or in some fairyland of your own invention? Don't you realize that people would talk—gossip—if you came to see me?"

"Surely you don't suppose that I should care twopence if they did?" demanded Pamela. "They always do 'talk' in villages."

"And do you suppose"—his voice vibrated a little—"do you suppose I could bear to feel that people were gossiping about you and that it was my fault? Besides, there are other reasons. After all"—grimly—"an outcast should remember his condition and behave accordingly."

"An outcast! But you wouldn't be an outcast—if you yourself didn't insist upon being one," she protested.

He looked at her curiously.

"You see, I know the necessity," he replied evenly. "I am—debarred from making friends."

He spoke very quietly, but she realized that behind that quietness lay a determination which was adamant.

"Then it's good-bye," she said, unconscious that a note of wistfulness had crept into her voice.

"Yes," he returned. "It's good-bye."

"But you'll come and see us—later—when your ankle is well again, won't you?" she asked, as she held out her hand.

He took it, and, holding it in his, stood looking down at her with eyes that were oddly intent. It was almost as if he were trying to commit to memory every line and curve of the young face uplifted to his.

"I think not," he said. "After all, I shall always have one good day to remember—I don't count the one when we quarrelled over Tatters." A smile, half sad, half bitter, crossed his lips. "And one good day is probably more than I deserve."

Suddenly he bent his head and for a moment she felt his lips hot against her hand.

"Good-bye, Pam," he said.

He released her abruptly and turned away. Hardly knowing what she did, she stumbled blindly out of the room and a minute later she was making her way down the drive.

She was conscious that a faint, drizzling rain had begun to fall. It drifted coldly against her burning cheeks. Above her she could hear the fir-trees which bordered the drive rustling together, whispering hostilely as they had whispered on that first day she had come to Boscowen.

CHAPTER VI

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

PAMELA was very quiet after her return to Rakehill, so unusually quiet that Toby and Bubbles became quite concerned about her welfare and inquired solicitously at intervals if she had a headache or was overtired, or did she think she was in for a cold? At last, rather fretted at being the object of so much attention, she took refuge in the suggested headache and retired to bed.

But it was long before sleep visited her. Instead, she lay with wide-open eyes, staring into the darkness, her thoughts centred confusedly about the man whom circumstances seemed to have combined to thrust into her life without any volition on his part. He had occupied Boscowen Farm for some months, and yet, until the day when Tatters had elected to chase his thoroughbred colts, she had never so much as set eyes upon him. Reticent and solitary, he had shut himself up in that remote tree-girdled house, within sound of the sea as it beat at the foot of the distant cliffs, and on his own confession had deliberately sought to keep the world at bay. And now that accident had thrown her into his company, it almost appeared as though he already regretted it and had snatched at the first opportunity of retiring back into his shell once more.

His whole attitude, with its violently contrasting moods, was puzzling in the extreme. She had been utterly repelled by his harshness at their first meeting, but since

then there were moments when it seemed to her that between the cracks in his black armour of misanthropy she had glimpsed a totally different man—someone humanly passionate and tender and laughter-loving. And then, just when she was beginning to think this, some bitter, ironical sneer would startle her back into the belief that her original conception of him was the right one, and she wondered curiously what happening of the past could have imbued him with such a complete distrust of life. That peculiarly sweet smile of his, rare though it was, argued a nature that was not naturally prone to bitterness. Yet she thought she had never met any man —not even her father, whose gaiety had cloaked a fairly cynical opinion of the world in general—who seemed so fundamentally embittered.

But—and in the darkness a fugitive little smile curved her lips—she was inwardly convinced that Blake Carrington was not all cynic, appearances notwithstanding. If he had been, it would have mattered nothing at all to him that her visits to Boscowen might provoke comment. He would have selfishly extracted whatever of temporary pleasure and distraction they afforded him, and let the consequences to her go hang. Whereas it *had* mattered to him. He had resented the mere idea that there should be any gossip attached to her name.

She wondered what he would think if he knew the various tales and criticism current in the district regarding the doings at Rakehill Manor and the part she played in them. Not that there had ever been anything actually wrong—nothing that could not be forgiven to the recklessness of youth and to wild spirits never taught to mould themselves into conventional channels. . . . It was a new sensation to feel that anyone minded what was said about her. Neither she nor any of the Waynes had ever cared in the slightest degree whether they shocked other people or not. Even her own father had only been highly

amused when he heard that someone had remarked, concerning Pamela, that "if no one took the trouble to break in that dare-devil young filly she'd infallibly kick over the traces some day."

Evidently Blake Carrington felt very differently about women, and Pamela was conscious of an odd feeling that she was rather glad he had not heard all the stories circulated in the neighborhood. For the first time in her life it seemed to matter what someone thought of her. . . . And then, vividly across the new gravity of her thoughts, flashed the memory of that sudden kiss of the hand. She could feel again Blake's hot lips pressed against her palm, hear the sudden roughness in his voice as he spoke. "Good-bye, Pam." And with the memory her cheeks burned in the darkness and she buried them against the cool linen of her pillow. Other men had kissed her, but no man's kiss had ever before sent flame leaping along her veins. . . .

It was long after midnight when at last the turmoil of her thoughts allowed her to sleep, and with the morning came news which for a moment drove Blake Carrington and everything connected with him completely out of her head. The letter containing the news in question lay innocently enough on her plate amongst half a dozen others—bills, patterns of dress material from a shop in Cranruth, a letter from a man-friend stationed out in India, and so forth—and had no appearance of being in any way a bomb-shell. It was written in a characteristically modern woman's hand, and bore the signature, "Judy Sarton."

"Dear Pamela"—it ran. "I feel that I really ought to begin by introducing myself, for it's more than possible you've entirely forgotten my existence, seeing that you were only a small child of eleven when last I saw you. I remember you so well—a leggy little slip of a girl with a

crop of rusty, sunburnt hair and eyes that looked like being a menace to mankind when you grew older. Are they, I wonder? I expect so. Because you're Harvard's daughter, and I think you are bound to have some of his charm.

"During the years we lived in England I was his closest friend, and it's that friendship which must be my introduction to you—that, and a letter he wrote me just a week before he was killed. It almost seems as though he must have had some prescience of what was coming—some foreknowledge that death was not far away.

"It is lying before me now as I write, this letter of his in which he asks me, should anything happen to him, to come back to Trethry as soon as possible and 'look after my girl—and the boys too, if you can.' It did not reach me until after his death—the post out here from Trethry takes about four weeks—and ever since it came, all these long months, I have been aching to come back to England to try and fulfil this last request of his.

"But, as when we returned—my step-son, Bay, is with me—we wanted to come home for good, it was necessary to make all arrangements about our property here and settle our affairs, and just when that was accomplished, Bay fell ill with blackwater fever, and his convalescence has been a long business.

"Now, at last, our plans are definitely fixed, and by the time this letter reaches you, we shall be on our way home. So perhaps it will be only a matter of a fortnight or so before I see you all—you and Toby and Bubbles."

It had been a difficult letter to write, and nothing but the fact that she was carrying out the last behest of the man she had once loved would have prevailed upon Judy to write it.

During the long years which had elapsed since her departure from England the hot flame of that love,

schooled and kept under even in the days when she and Harvard had been together at Trelyan, had come to burn less feverishly. The steady pressure of life, with its daily demands on heart and thought, had long since dulled the keen poignancy of parting, and now Judy could think without heartache, but with that quiet tenderness of remembrance which love leaves behind it, of the man who had once filled so large a part of her horizon. A fire that is not fed inevitably dies down, and although at first letters had passed regularly betwixt them, they had gradually grown shorter and rarer until of later years they had ceased altogether. And now, out of the void, bringing with it a rush of warm recollection, came this letter of Harvard's with its claim upon her generosity.

"I expect they'll simply hate me for it, Bay," she had told her step-son unhappily when they discussed the matter together. "I know I should if I were in their shoes. Fancy having a kind of guardian thrust upon you in the shape of a woman you've never seen since you were a small child."

Bay had smiled across at her affectionately. They were very good friends, these two, and since the death of Radley Sarton, about three years previously, they had grown to be much closer comrades than the latter's jealous nature had permitted during his lifetime.

"I don't think I should object at all if you were the woman, my dear Judy," returned Bay.

"But you're used to me," protested Mrs. Sarton. "Besides, the eldest of these babes is only four-and-twenty —and no one at that age takes kindly to the sort of grandmotherly advice I shall probably have to give them." She shook her head mournfully. "And Pamela, the girl, will probably give me more trouble than any of them. I can always hit it off with boys, but any girl would resent

a duenna suddenly descending upon her out of clear skies, so to speak."

Bay's dark eyes twinkled wickedly. They were rather dangerous eyes from a chaperon's point of view.

"Turn her over to me, then," he suggested. "I should rather fancy myself in the rôle of guardian to a pretty young woman of two-and-twenty. She *is* pretty, I suppose?"

"Probably. I expect you hardly remember her, but she was a very attractive kiddy. Much too attractive for me to trust her to your tender mercies, my dear Bay," Judy assured him. Adding, with a smile: "On the whole, I think it's quite a dispensation of Providence that you're going into Leicestershire to hunt when we get back instead of coming straight down to Trethry. It will simplify my duties as watch-dog."

She foresaw many difficulties in this informal kind of guardianship Wayne had asked her to undertake, but the appeal of that last letter of his could not be set aside.

" . . . I know I'm asking a lot of you, Judy dear," he had written. "But then, when did I ever *not* ask a lot of you? And you always gave it. I think you must have been a Wednesday's child—'loving and giving.'

"These youngsters of mine badly need a guiding hand on the reins—the thing I've always been too careless to give 'em. The boys will probably find their feet all right. Boys can, and a few more tumbles more or less don't hurt them. But—it must be a sign of old age, Judy—I'm beginning to feel a pricking of my conscience concerning Pamela. She's confoundedly pretty—too pretty to be allowed to run wild as I've always let her run. While Miles was alive he steadied her, because she simply worshipped him. Looking back, I sometimes think he steadied us all. But since then—she's like a wild young colt and a spoilt princess and a topping little sport rolled

into one. Can you deal with such a feminine contraption?"

"Dearest woman in the world, if anyone can, you can, and so, should anything happen to me, and it is in any way possible, come back to Trethry and play guardian angel to my brats.

"Don't think I'm getting morbid and mawkish in my old age. I'm not. But last week I came an almighty purler over a blind ditch and nearly broke my worthless neck. And it struck me afterwards that it's a precious small gap between life and death—and sometimes a very short take-off."

If Pamela could have seen what her father had written to the woman he loved she would have understood better all that lay behind the letter which she herself had received. But those last scrawled sheets in Harvard Wayne's handwriting would never be read by other eyes than Judy's own, and the chief thing of which Pamela was conscious, as Judy had foreseen, was a wild sense of revolt that a duenna should be thus suddenly thrust upon her.

"Toby! Bubbles! Just listen to this!" she exclaimed heatedly. "Oh! What can father have been thinking of?"

The blank dismay in her voice brought Toby and Bubbles to their feet. Leaving their matutinal bacon and eggs cooling on their plates, they crowded round her, reading the letter over her shoulder.

"Oh, Lord! We don't want an old woman meddling round in our affairs!" groaned Bubbles, when he had mastered its contents. "What on earth can we do, Toby? She'll feel she's been sort of divinely appointed to worry our lives out."

"She's not an old woman," returned Toby reflectively. "I suppose you hardly remember her—you can only have been a kid of nine when the Sartons left England."

Bubbles remembered her vaguely as someone who had scolded and petted him at appropriate intervals and spent

a great deal of time in his father's company. To a small boy of nine, a woman of twenty-eight, as Judy then was, had appeared as one vested in authority and of great age.

"Actually," resumed Toby, making a swift calculation, "Mrs. Sarton can only be about thirty-nine. She mayn't be so bad, after all. I remember I used to think her rather a good sort."

Pamela shook her head.

"I don't think I care for women of thirty-nine," she observed. "They're old enough to be superior and 'bossy' and aggravating, but they're not old enough to be really out of the way on the shelf."

"Pam, my beloved, I see you being gradually converted into a really 'nice ladylike girl,'" declared Bubbles, grinning. "No more riding hell-for-leather over the country, wearing unfeminine breeches and top-boots, no more festive little supper-parties, with *'Dancing till you're tired'* in the corner of the invites, no more coming home with the milk in the morning from other folks' jamborees, no more doing just what you please, when you please, and how you please, no more——"

"Oh, shut up, Bubbles!" exclaimed Pamela, laughing in spite of herself. "I tell you what we *will* do! We'll at least have one last frivolous supper-party, unspoiled by any lynx-eyed guardian—next week after the meet at Corwen Green. Supper in the ballroom and dancing till any old hour."

The proposal was received with rapturous acclamation and carried unanimously, and as soon as breakfast was over Pamela proceeded to indite the invitations.

"What about Vera Barstein? Is she to be asked?" she queried, looking up from a pile of briefly worded notes.

Toby and Bubbles glanced across at each other a trifle uncomfortably. The name of Barstein, unknown to Pam-

ela, had come to have a rather unpleasant significance for them.

"Oh, I suppose so," said the former, a little irritably. "She enjoys a 'rag'—and doesn't get much chance of one in Cranruth."

"Besides," added Bubbles, "she's quite a decent sort herself. She can't help her father's being such a rank outsider. Anyway, it keeps him pleased if she's asked to places."

Pamela laughed.

"Well, I suppose there's no particular reason why we should bother about whether old Barstein's pleased or not," she said lightly.

"No—no, of course not," replied Toby hastily. "Still, I think I should ask her."

So Miss Barstein was asked, and in due course accepted, like most of the other invited guests. There were rarely many refusals to a projected "rag" at Rakehill, and a pleasant sense of anticipation began gradually to counteract the depression induced by Judy Sarton's letter.

And then, two days before the one appointed for the final "unchaperoned" supper-party, an unexpected cloud descended upon the Manor. Tatters was missing! He had disappeared in the early hours of the morning, probably nefariously bent upon a little private rabbiting, and had never returned. Not infrequently he had eluded detection and played truant before, but always, when evening came, he had presented himself, tired and muddy and squirmingly apologetic, for the scolding which he knew would be in store for him. But on this occasion sundown brought no sign of him, and no amount of whistling and calling or searching in the immediate vicinity of the Manor produced any result. Pamela herself remained out of doors looking for him until nearly midnight, and then a storm of rain drove her back into the house. Bubbles, who had

assisted in the fruitless search, tried ineffectually to cheer her up.

"I shouldn't worry, Pam. He can't be lost. He knows his way for miles round. I'm certain he'll turn up smiling in the morning."

But the morning came and the morning after that, bringing with them no Tatters nor any sign of Tatters, and it was with rather a heavy heart that Pamela set about her preparations for the evening's entertainment. The boys, however, still persisted that he would turn up all right. As the day wore on, lights were lit and flowers bloomed softly under their golden glow, while the fine old ballroom, with its tall French windows and raised dais at the further end—still fine in its proportions, although in places the plaster was coming off the walls and patches of damp were only too visible—took on a festive and gala aspect, and gradually the resiliency of two-and-twenty began to reassert itself and Pamela's spirits went up.

Williams alone appeared depressed at the prospect of the coming supper-party. Early in the day he had approached Toby with a face as long as a fiddle.

"Will you be requiring champagne to-night, Master Toby?" he inquired rather deprecatingly.

Toby stared.

"Why, of course," he answered. "What else were you thinking of giving us, Williams? Lemonade?" he asked, smiling.

But Williams had no answering smile.

"Our stock of champagne is getting rather low, sir—very low, I should say."

"Then ring up and order some more," replied Toby easily. "The nineteen hundred and eleven—same as before." And with that he sauntered out to the stables and was soon lost to the consideration of all matters extraneous to his horses and hounds.

Williams rang up obediently. It would never have en-

tered his head to disobey an order. But it frequently worried him to know where the money would come from that was to pay for all these extravagances. It would have worried him still more if he had known where it really did come from.

CHAPTER VII

THE UNCHAPERONED SUPPER-PARTY

PAMELA had almost recovered her usual buoyant spirits when she finally descended to receive her guests. At the back of her mind the thought of Tatters, lost and hungry and probably feeling very sorry for himself, still nagged and importuned, but soon she was swept along on the stream of gaiety which flowed and eddied about her.

An oddly assorted crowd filled the ballroom, some of the women wearing frocks which bore the indelible impress of the local dressmaker, others gowned in the latest craze of fashion, while others still—these were chiefly the members of the Bread-and-Butter Club—had arrayed themselves in weird-looking costumes which, they proudly volunteered, were of their own designing. "And looked it too," as Loo commented dispassionately.

The Bread-and-Butter Club was quite an institution at Trelyan. It was principally composed of a number of youthful and impecunious artists who came and went as the inspiration of the moment and the material necessities of life dictated. They had acquired a rambling old house, curiously built into the side of the cliff and situated just round the corner from the quaint little harbour of Trelyan Cove. This they had converted into a clubhouse, where the members of the club could obtain a somewhat haphazard species of board and lodging. They could also talk Art with a capital A, uninterrupted by the Philistines, while material for pictures—which were ultimately, of

course, to be hung on the line and perpetuate their creators as geniuses of the brush—was to be found all along the wild Cornish coast and amongst the picturesque fisher-folk. In summer the club was packed to the limit of its capacity and a bit over, but even in winter there were usually a certain number to be found staying there. It was only on rare occasions that the old house was solely occupied by Mrs. Grimswade, the elderly and wizen-faced housekeeper.

They were an irresponsible Bohemian crowd, the colony of artists who had established themselves in this eyrie overhanging the water, careless of the conventions, and from the initial inauguration of the club, four years previously, the Waynes had been unanimously adopted as honorary members.

Probably had Miles—who "steadied us all," as his father had written to Judy—been alive at the time, membership of the Bread-and-Butter Club would have been promptly forbidden—certainly in so far as Pamela was concerned. But since there had been no one wise enough to veto the scheme, the Wayne trio had joined the club *con amore,* attended its vagabond and hilarious *réunions,* and invited all and sundry of its members to Rakehill in return.

A dozen or more of the latter were included among the guests to-night. It was easy enough to pick out the clean, well-groomed soldier-men from Cranruth barracks, the hunting men in their gay pink coats, and the carelessly turned-out members of the artists' fraternity, with their hair a trifle too long, their collars a trifle too low, and the general appearance of their clothes suggesting that a closer acquaintance with a clothes-brush might effect an improvement.

But they were one and all bent upon enjoyment, and as the evening progressed the fun rose higher and higher. There was quite a good deal of latent talent amongst the party, and every now and again the proceedings were en-

livened by a brief amateur cabaret performance or a hunting song with a rousing chorus. Everyone did precisely as they pleased. In one corner a serious and intent quartette discussed high art, in another a much lighter-hearted group were throwing dice for halfpennies, while every now and then someone struck up a fox-trot and there was a general rush for the dancing space in the centre of the floor. One boy of nineteen, a recent recruit to the Bread-and-Butter Club, played that heart-rending and most difficult of instruments, the saxophone—played it so that sometimes it sounded like a human voice crying for what is lost, sometimes like the wind wailing lonelily in desert places. He could have earned a small fortune as a member of any orchestra, but he regarded the saxophone merely as a hobby, while he took his art immensely seriously and painted shockingly bad pictures of the impressionist type which no one would ever have dreamed of buying.

As usual, a good many of the men clustered in Pamela's vicinity, angling for dances, since, whatever else she was or was not credited with, the entire neighborhood conceded her supremacy as a dancer. Dancing seemed to come to her as naturally as walking, and often when she was a small child, and Harvard Wayne had had a party of bachelor friends to dinner, he had been wont to send up word for her to be dressed and brought downstairs again to dance for them. And she had danced—on the table where a space would be hastily cleared for her—a thin little wisp of a thing, with her coppery hair shining like an aureole beneath the lights and her long, topaz-golden eyes glowing, as some man had once said, like black-edged stars.

"I say, what's this ghastly news we hear, Miss Wayne?" demanded a Cranruth man who hunted regularly with the Rakehill pack. "That there's to be a she-dragon installed at the Manor. Is it true?"

"Yes, by Jove!" chimed in someone else. "We hear that

for the future you'll only put in a decorous appearance at the meets, duly chaperoned——"

"And that the Bread-and-Butter Club will see you no more," subjoined the saxophone player despairingly. "Just after I've joined, too!"

"Probably that's why," flashed back another voice.

Pamela nodded reassuringly at the concerned faces of the little group.

"I fancy the news must have been slightly exaggerated," she said mildly. "It's true that a friend of my father's, a Mrs. Sarton, is coming to live at Trethry—the Sartons used to live there a good many years ago, you know. But"—with a small, significant smile—"I don't think her arrival will alter things—much!"

A whoop of satisfaction went up, echoing to the very rafters, and then, as the appearance of the loaded buffet tables—carried in under William's supervision by two stalwart stablemen, clad in their Sunday best—coincided with Pamela's cool announcement, there followed a fusillade of popping corks and supper began with every one cheering and drinking the health of their youthful hostess. It was an extremely go-as-you-please repast. People foraged for themselves and their friends, and then sat indiscriminately on table or chairs or on the floor, just as the spirit moved them, while they consumed lobster and cold pheasant and *foie gras* and ices amid an ever-increasing babel of talk.

And then, while the wine still glinted goldenly in the long-stemmed glasses and the cigarette smoke began to float upward in grey spirals to the ceiling, somebody in a far corner of the room raised the cry that Pamela should dance. For a moment no one heeded it. Laughter and the rapid cross-fire of chattering voices smothered it, and Pamela herself, who was sitting on the edge of a table, swinging her feet and exchanging gay nonsense with a group of scarlet and black and pink coated figures, never heard the suggestion at all.

"I'll get her to dance." The speaker was a woman with a frail, peculiarly sinuous figure. Her black hair was drawn severely back above long, carefully tended eyebrows. Beneath them gleamed eyes of which the setting had been deliberately elongated by skilfully painted shadows, while tinted powder gave a warm brick-dusty glow to her cheeks. The sheathed green-gold tissue of her frock, caught on the hip with a single flaming rose, revealed every line of her supple body. She looked rather as though she might be a highly specialised dancer. As a matter of fact, she contributed nothing whatsoever to the world's sum-total beyond an exotic, over-emphasized effect of sex and temperament. She drifted across the room with a vague floating movement, a cigarette in one hand, in the other a half-consumed sandwich which bore a neat little serrated semi-circle where her sharp white teeth had bitten into it. With the calmly indifferent ruthlessness of the typical feline she insinuated herself through the group which surrounded Pamela and stopped directly in front of her.

"Pam darling, we want you to dance," she observed in a listless voice.

"Oh, no, not to-night." Pam shook her head vigorously. "I don't feel a bit like it."

"We want it," repeated the other. The boy who played the saxophone was standing near her, and she leaned forward and whispered something to him. He nodded, and collecting a couple of other men on his way, moved across to the dais where the piano stood. A minute later a strange, haunting melody, fashioned on some Red Indian chant, stole across the room, the piercing sweetness of the saxophone wailing above the undertone of the other instruments. As the music rose and fell, there was something curiously compelling about it, in the fatalistic sadness of the melody and the hollow intervals of the harmonies accompanying it. It held all the chill wistfulness of moonlight, the moan-

ing of the wind in the tree-tops of limitless forest, the crying of a passionate race that is dying—and knows it.

"Dance, Pamela," said the listless voice again. And without further protest Pamela slid from the table. Her eyes were glowing softly.

She danced, at first slowly, swaying and bending to the sobbing rhythm. Gradually the quality of the measure changed, quickened, left the mysticism of pain and grief behind it. Then came a pause, and when the music spoke again it flared into syncopation—that pulsating, irresistibly vital rhythm which grips the senses like none other.

. . . A roar of applause broke out as the music ceased and Pamela stopped dead on the beat, flushed and laughing, her slight young breast rising and falling with the exertion of that last mad dance. In the same moment Loo flashed out from among the crowd and, picking her up in his arms, swung her on to his shoulder. Another shout of acclamation went up. Someone thrust a half-filled glass of champagne into her hand, and with a blithe "Cheerio, every one!" she waved it aloft. The musicians, catching the infection, broke into a headlong one-step. everybody linked hands, and while some of them formed a ring and danced in a wild circle round Loo as he stood with Pamela perched on his shoulder, the others careered round the room in a long chain, laughing and shouting and singing snatches of the one-step melody as they swept along.

All at once, in the middle of the whirlwind dance, there was a little crash, and Pamela's glass fell to the ground and shivered into fragments. Loo felt her arm suddenly tighten convulsively round his neck, and she gave a cry.

"Stop! Put me down, Loo—put me down!" As she spoke, somewhere outside a dog barked—a sharp, expostulating bark.

Loo lowered her obediently to the ground, while the ring of figures capered round them broke apart and, swinging aside, joined on, hand in hand, with the string of dancers

who still threaded their way, helter-skelter, round the room —in and out, between chairs, skirting tables, circling the dais where the piano stood and where the musicians were playing ever faster and faster.

They had none of them seen what had startled her into a sudden realization of how this mad revel must appear to any onlooker. No one else had noticed the tall, dark figure of a man, standing looking in through one of the big French windows which opened from the ballroom on to a paved terrace. Outside, a crescent moon shed a pale, elusive light, and from the vantage point of her triumphant position on Loo's shoulder Pamela had seen—and recognized—the man standing half hidden in the shadows flung by the tall stone pillars which flanked the windows. She felt her cheeks burn. How long had he been there? How much had he seen? Even as she brought Loo to a halt the figure moved abruptly away and disappeared into the faint November mist which hung above the garden.

"What's the matter? Where are you off to?" asked Loo, bewildered, hastening after her as she slipped from his arms and made her way towards the door.

She waved him back. "Don't come. I don't want you."

Thoroughly puzzled, but knowing her too well to dream of opposing any wish of hers, Loo fell back, and Pamela passed swiftly out of the room.

As she went, the front-door bell clanged laboriously through the house, and Williams appeared in response. She checked him from opening the door.

"It's all right, Williams. I know who it is," she said, and, in obedience to her imperative gesture, he disappeared once more into the servants' quarters, while she hurried forward and threw open the front door. Blake Carrington stepped across the threshold. Under his arm, quivering with excitement, huddled the lost Tatters. One of his paws was carefully bandaged with a clean handkerchief.

"Oh!" With a cry of delight she held out her arms

and Tatters leaped into them, licking her face and emitting little whimpering sounds of excitement and delight, while Pamela, regardless of her evening frock, hugged him tightly against her breast.

"Where did you find him?" she asked at last.

"He was caught by the foot in a trap," returned Blake. "No, not on my land," he added hastily, in answer to her quick glance of interrogation. "One of his paws is a bit torn, but it will be all right in a day or two." He paused, then continued levelly: "I don't usually call on people at this hour of the night. But, having come across Tatters and chancing to see lights burning in your windows, I brought him back. I gather, however"—his voice hardening—"that my visit is ill-timed."

"Ill-timed? Were you"—she hesitated a moment—"were you—shocked?"

Blake recalled the glimpse he had caught through the window of the ballroom—the tables cluttered with gold-foiled bottles and half-emptied glasses, the veil of smoke hanging above the room in pale strands and ribbons of filmy grey, the rollicking one-step, and the gay rabble of dancers turning and twisting amid shouts of laughter, while the man who had ridden him down on his own land, a bare fortnight ago, was holding Pamela aloft on his shoulder. He would like to have smashed the French window and snatched her out of his arms then and there.

"I was—rather surprised," he said quietly.

"But why? We were only having fun," she protested lamely. Something in the keen, slightly contemptuous gaze of Blake's blue eyes brought the colour to her cheeks. What had appeared harmless enough prior to his arrival—the usual heedless romp into which the Rakehill parties generally developed—now assumed a different aspect altogether.

His expression softened. She looked such a child standing there with her tumbled hair, blue shadows of fatigue

beneath eyes over-brilliant, and Tatters struggling to lick her face from his position in the curve of one slender white arm.

"You ought to be in bed and asleep," he said. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Pretty late, I suppose," she acknowledged.

"It is"—shortly. "And what time will it be when you finish off?"

"Oh, three-ish, I expect," she answered, smiling a little. "We generally make a night of it, you know."

His face altered. He almost seemed to wince at the words, as though they twanged some sensitive chord of memory.

"That sort of night sometimes has to be paid for—rather heavily," he said slowly. Then, with sudden roughness, he burst out: "Good God, child! Isn't there anyone to look after you? I——"

He checked himself abruptly. His blue eyes held a curious thwarted look in them, as of a man who fought back something that strove for utterance.

Pamela was conscious of it—conscious, too, of the passionate instinct of protectiveness which underlay the harshly spoken words. It brought back vividly the remembrance of someone else who had always taken care of her, and with the lightest of hands on the reins shielded her even from her own impulsiveness.

"No," she replied a little shakily. "There's no one—now. Miles used to."

"Miles? Who was Miles?"

"My eldest brother," she answered. "He could always keep us all in order. He died—some years ago. . . . Nothing's ever been quite the same since," she added desolately, overwhelmed by a sudden aching longing for the man who had meant almost everything in the world to her, motherless and, for all practical purposes, fatherless as she had always been—since Harvard Wayne, most charm-

ing of playfellows, had lacked all the attributes normally attributed to fatherhood. Carrington felt the quick sense of loss which had surged up within her.

"Was he like you?" he asked gently. Without any actual protestation of sympathy, his voice conveyed it.

She shook her head.

"Not a bit. But Bubbles is rather like what he was at Bubbles' age."

"And Bubbles is your favourite?"—smiling a little.

"How did you guess?"—with a glance of surprise at his swift perception.

"The tone of your voice told me."

"Well, he is rather a darling," admitted Pamela. "And I—I sort of look after him, you know. He needs it, too," she added, her mouth curving into a very lovable smile.

"Anyway, he's a very lucky young man to have such a nice guardian angel allotted to him."

Blake chatted on for a few minutes, purposely keeping the conversation in a light strain in order to distract her thoughts from the memories evoked by the mention of her much-loved elder brother.

"I won't keep you from your guests any longer," he said at last, holding out his hand.

Pamela slipped hers into it.

"Thank you so much for bringing Tatters back," she said. "I'll take him straight off to bed, poor darling."

"It would be more to the point if you could take yourself off to bed, too," he returned irritably. And then he went home, to tramp restlessly up and down, up and down his room until the dawn was thrusting pale fingers up the eastern sky.

Pamela tucked Tatters snugly up in a blanket before making her way slowly back to the ballroom. People were still dancing, but it seemed to her that there was an air of false excitement pervading everything—something forced and meretricious. That brief interview with Blake, the

frank disapproval in his eyes, had sobered her curiously, and when, as usual, several of the men came crowding round her, asking her to dance, she shook her head.

"What's happened, Pam?" demanded Lucian Gale, when she had quietly turned him down with the rest. "Where have you been all this time? Have you had someone here to see you?"

"Mr. Carrington found Tatters and brought him back," she vouchsafed shortly.

The announcement created a brief excitement. Comments upon Blake Carrington mingled with congratulations upon the recovery of Tatters. Loo eyed her curiously.

"But I don't see that that's a reason why you shouldn't dance any more," he protested. "What's Carrington been saying to you?" he added, a note of suspicion in his voice.

"Oh, nothing particular," she replied vaguely. Nor could anything more be extracted from her.

Somehow a damper seemed to have fallen upon the assembly. A few of the more hilarious spirits still tried to force the pace, but their efforts rang hollow, and gradually they petered out. Pamela's new gravity seemed to have permeated the entire roomful, and one or two of the party, shrewdly attributing this sudden soberness to its rightful source, loudly voted Carrington a wet blanket. "He's managed to knock all the stuffing out of Pam, anyhow," grumbled the boy who played the saxophone.

And Pamela, overhearing, wondered vaguely to herself why the savour seemed suddenly to have gone out of an evening which had been planned in a spirit of such light-hearted defiance of Judy Sarton's impending chaperonage.

She was glad when at last the party broke up and the guests took their departure, trooping away amidst a gale of good-byes, and she was able to make her way upstairs to bed. She slept restlessly, waking again and again to the sound of Blake's voice: "Good God, child! Is there no one to look after you?" And against the background of

darkness she seemed to see his face, his blue eyes gazing intently into hers with that strange look of thwarting in them.

CHAPTER VIII

FRIEND OF DAVID

JUDY SARTON stood gazing thoughtfully out of the big dining-room window at Trethry. Immediately outside ran a flagged terrace, a low stone wall, broken by a flight of steps, separating it from the old-world garden with its fine cedars shading close-cut lawns and winding walks bordered by clipped yew. Beyond again, where the grassy slopes of the surrounding park curved smoothly downward to the valley, the silver streak of a river glinted intermittently through the morning mist. Terrace, park, and garden, all bore a well-tended air, and Judy nodded her sleek brown head approvingly.

"They've looked after it all right," she reflected contentedly. There were tenants and tenants, as she knew very well, and she was conscious of a quick flash of gratitude towards the people who had occupied Trethry from the time of the Sartons' departure from England until six months ago, and who had evidently cared for the place as if it had been their own.

Since then, a former butler and his wife whom Judy had re-engaged had been in charge, unpacking and re-installing the furniture which had been stored during her absence and generally preparing the house for its mistress's return. They had arranged everything just as it had been distributed in former days. Chairs and tables, cabinets and china, occupied the self-same places. Even the pictures were ranged around the walls precisely as they had hung during those eight years she had lived there with her hus-

band. The familiar aspect of it all brought back the past with a rush. In imagination she could hear Bay, a youngster in his teens, whistling untunefully about the house, see Harvard Wayne cantering across the park, as he came or went on some wild devil of a horse that no one else dared ride, but which, with the touch of his magician's hands on the reins, became as docile as a newly-fledged angel. How often had she stood at that same window, watching him draw nearer and nearer, her heart racing, every fibre of her body aching for his near presence, yet with her whole will bent on hiding from him all that his coming meant to her.

Eleven years—eleven years! It was a small eternity, and that thrill of youth clamouring for all that was forbidden it had died down into the gentle, unhurtful sadness of a tender reminiscence. So much water had run under the bridge since then! The stream of life flows ceaselessly on, softening sharp edges as it flows, and oft-times bringing with it something to take the place of that which it has borne remorselessly away on its bosom.

Looking back over her married life, Judy recognized that she had not had a great deal to complain of—no more than nine out of ten other women. Radley Sarton had been an ordinary, kindly, well-meaning man, absorbed in the business side of his life—and hopelessly dull. When the ardour and enthusiasm of the first few months of matrimony had spent itself, he declined into the average prosaic husband who needs an earthquake or a war, with its imminent hazard of life and death, to remind him of the fact that heaven never intended him to take entirely for granted the woman who has given her whole life into his keeping.

In the case of Judy and her husband, however, no earthquake intervened, while the Great War had merely affected him in so far as his bank balance was concerned. And the latter was of such entirely satisfying dimensions that even the inroads of taxation compelled no drastic changes in his

mode of living. So the dullness had become a settled habit, and Judy, whose eager vitality had chafed bitterly against it, had gradually learned to bring to the peculiar happenings of life that humorous tolerance which is a gift the gods sometimes bestow upon those from whom they have withheld the priceless dower of happiness.

But it was almost inevitable that this sudden plunge into the surroundings of long ago should bring back the tide of remembrance, sweet and bitter, bitter and sweet, in full flood, and for a few minutes she let it sweep over her unchecked as she stood at the window gazing out upon the once familiar landscape. Then, with a characteristic shrug of her shoulders, she deliberately turned her back on it and, crossing the room, rang the bell.

"I want the car round—at once, Tiffany," she said when the butler appeared. "I'm going over to Rakehill."

The man's eyes rested on her with the kindly, intimate understanding of an old servant.

"Yes, madam," he answered quietly, adding, as though the words escaped him almost without his own volition: "It's like old times to hear you giving the order to go to Rakehill."

Inconsequently, the speech made her realize how utterly and irrevocably it was *un*like old times. She realized it still more as the car, quickly covering the short two miles which lay betwixt Trethry and the Manor, swung in between the latter's gates and hummed up the drive. Even in the old days it had been only too evident that the master of Rakehill gave little enough attention to its upkeep, but now it was so completely neglected that it had more the appearance of a place where no one had lived for several years than anything else. The edges of the drive were green with moss, branches that had been torn from the trees by the autumn gales lay where they had fallen amid the tall rank grass which had been allowed to grow unchecked on either hand, while the inequalities of the road-surface sent the

car leaping and jumping as though it were negotiating a cart-track.

A similar air of neglect pervaded the exterior of the house. Chipped and broken tiles edged the eaves, and the roof was patched—picturesquely enough—with velvety green where moss and lichen had been allowed to gain firm foothold, while a curtain of untrimmed ivy sheeted the walls. The front door stood carelessly open, and as the car slackened to a standstill Judy obtained an uninterrupted view of the hall. Here, too, the same air of dilapidation prevailed, and when she rang the bell it creaked ominously, as though the worn bell-wire might give out at any moment.

She rang several times, but no one came to answer the door, for the very excellent reason that visitors who were on a formal enough footing to necessitate their ringing the bell were practically unknown at Rakehill—certainly during the morning hours. Most of the Waynes' friends were in the habit of strolling in unannounced and hunting up whomever they had come to see, and this being the accepted custom, Williams, at the moment of Mrs. Sarton's arrival, was fathoms deep in the underground wine-cellar, gloomily calculating the ravages which the previous night's supper-party had made in his rapidly thinning stores.

At last, despairing of gaining admittance in the usual way, Judy stepped lightly across the threshold into the hall and proceeded on a tour of discovery. The doors leading into several rooms stood wide open and she peered in hopefully, only to find that each was empty. In one of them, however, the remains of breakfast still lingered on the table. Glancing down at her wrist-watch, and seeing that its hands pointed to eleven o'clock, she made a small grimace; evidently the Waynes were by no means early risers. Then, remembering that at the end of the long hall another door led into the ballroom, she walked briskly along and opened it.

An ejaculation of mingled surprise and distaste escaped

her at the sight which met her eyes. The ballroom was in precisely the same condition as that in which it had been left overnight, except for the removal of the few surviving bottles which Williams was at the moment occupied in bestowing back upon the cellar shelves. Like the rest of the few servants who remained to staff the rambling old Manor, he had far too much work to do, and had therefore been compelled to leave the straightening of the ballroom until a more convenient season. But the desolate "morning after the night before" appearance it presented gave Judy an unpleasant shock. It was only too eloquent of all that she had half dreaded, half expected she might find at Rakehill. In the cool, revealing brightness of the wintry sunlight the room presented a particularly unkempt and unattractive aspect, with its wilting flowers and its dishevelled-looking tables, still glinting with last night's wine-glasses and the foil of emptied bottles. The polished floor was misted with the light dust of dancing feet, while here and there twinkled a tiny rivulet of beads or a shred of gold or silver lace which had become detached from the frock it had adorned.

"Come along. Let's cut through the ballroom. It's much quicker."

The gay, boyish voice broke suddenly across Mrs. Sarton's troubled thoughts, and the next moment she heard someone fumbling at the catch of one of the French windows.

"Oh, hang! It's locked!" protested the same voice with unabated cheerfulness. "We shall have to go round."

On a swift impulse, Judy darted across the room, unlatched the window and threw it open. Bubbles and Pamela were standing together outside, each carrying a gun and some filthy, oily-looking rags.

"Who on earth——" began Bubbles. And then Pamela stepped quickly in front of him.

"I know who it is!" she exclaimed. "It's Mrs. Sarton!"

"Yes," returned Judy. "I'm Mrs. Sarton. And I'm sure you must be Pamela."

Pam put the gun she was carrying, together with a bunch of unsavoury-looking rags, down on the nearest table.

"I'm not fit to shake hands with anyone," she said. "Bubbles and I were just going to spend the morning cleaning guns."

Judy laughed.

"I don't think I want to shake hands," she said, as she bent forward and kissed Pamela warmly. "And you, Bubbles," she went on, turning to the big young man who towered above her five-foot-four. "May I kiss you too—if I can reach?"

She laughed up at him with gay, provocative brown eyes, and Bubbles' charming smile flashed out in return.

"Rather!" he declared whole-heartedly, and promptly facilitated matters by stooping his gracelessly handsome young head to the level of hers.

At the same moment Toby swung past the windows, returning from his usual morning visit to the stables, and pulled up abruptly at the somewhat surprising vision of his younger brother embracing an entirely unknown woman while Pam looked placidly on. Then, instinctively guessing who the stranger must be, he stepped in through the window and joined the trio.

"Well, Toby, would you have recognized me?" demanded Judy, when they had exchanged greetings.

He nodded smilingly.

"Of course I should. You've not altered much, you know."

She laughed.

"What a delightful compliment! And you said it quite as if you meant it, too!"

"I did," Toby assured her. "But, I say, Pam," he added, casting a dismayed glance round at the bacchanalian aspect of the ballroom. "Do take Mrs. Sarton into some other

room. This looks beastly. Why the devil hasn't old Williams cleaned up the mess here?" He turned apologetically to Judy. "We had a—a sort of bun-scramble here last night," he said explanatorily, "and I'm afraid we kept it up a bit late." Beneath his freckles he coloured a little. Somehow or other he was conscious of feeling slightly ashamed that Mrs. Sarton's first impressions should be what they inevitably must be in the circumstances.

"Don't worry about that," answered Judy quickly. "It's my fault for coming over here at such an ungodly hour without warning. But I only arrived yesterday, and I simply couldn't wait to see you all."

"I'm glad you didn't," replied Pamela impulsively, tucking her arm into Judy's and leading the way out of the ballroom. "I think it was just dear of you to come over at once like this."

To her own inward astonishment she found she meant every word she said. The "she-dragon" had turned out to be so entirely different from what any one of them had expected. Plump and not very tall, her clothes right up to date, with humour in her eyes and at the corners of her lips, she did not look in the least as though she could be either "superior" or "aggravating," as Pam had prognosticated, and she was most certainly of much too vital a type ever to be "really out of the way on the shelf." She was just a jolly modern woman with a bit more experience of life than they had themselves, and the Waynes took her to their hearts at once.

Judy's own heart went out to them responsively, although inwardly, as they chatted on, revealing with every word the heedless, happy-go-lucky existence they led, she wondered ruefully how she was to deal with such a tribe. She stayed to lunch, but told them she must leave soon afterwards.

"I want to visit the new owner of Boscowen Farm," she explained. "He rents Valley Cottage and the fields ad-

joining it from us, you know. Have you met him, by the way?"

Pamela flushed suddenly, and Judy, whose observant eyes missed very little, made a mental note of the fact that it might be necessary to regard the new owner of Boscowen as a factor in the general situation. She listened with some amusement to an account of the hunting dispute and the incidents connected with it.

"I think your friend, Mr. Lucian Gale, must be a somewhat high-handed young man," she commented candidly. "I'm not sure that my sympathies aren't rather with Mr. Carrington."

"They won't be—when you've met him," averred Bubbles. "He has the reputation for being the most ungracious and taciturn chap in the district."

"Oh! Then I shall have to screw up my courage for my interview this afternoon," returned Judy. "When Bay comes back—he's hunting in Leicestershire at present—he'll tackle all the estate work, of course."

"Bay—it's such an odd name!" remarked Pamela, trying to recall some picture of Judy's step-son, but failing.

"It's really Bayard—a most unsuitable name for him, by the way," returned Mrs. Sarton. "There never was anyone less like a Bayard! Even now, he's hopelessly tangled up with a French countess—at least she calls herself a countess. She'd been visiting friends in Singapore, and came home on the same boat as we did."

"And made the most of opportunity?" suggested Toby, a twinkle in his light-blue eyes.

Judy nodded and twinkled back.

"Yes. Madame de Brécourt had a perfect passion for moonlight effects at sea."

They all laughed, and soon afterwards Judy took her departure, and drove across to Boscowen Farm. She was thinking deeply as the car sped along, and her thoughts were still preoccupied with the affairs of the Wayne fam-

ily when the house door opened almost simultaneously with her ring of the bell and she found herself confronted, not, as she had naturally expected, by a white-capped maid, but by a tall, grave-looking man, the keen, unwelcoming glance of whose intensely blue eyes seemed to pierce right through her.

"Is it—are you Mr. Carrington?" she asked a trifle confusedly.

"Yes. I'm Blake Carrington," he replied, but made no movement to stand aside and let her pass. Recalling all that the Waynes had confided to her regarding his churlishness towards strangers, she regarded him with some inward amusement.

"I'm afraid you don't like visitors, do you?" she said, the corners of her mouth quivering a little with a suppressed smile.

"No," he answered candidly. "I'm afraid I don't."

"Well, I'm not a visitor—in the usual sense of the word," she explained. "I'm—I'm your landlady."

There was something very disarming in the friendly, humorous brown eyes which met Carrington's as she made this announcement. A flicker of amusement crossed his face.

"Are you sure?" he said dryly. "You don't look in the least like one—and I've had a fairly extensive experience of them."

She smiled outright.

"I am, really, though," she assured him. "I'm Mrs. Sarton."

Carrington bent his head.

"In that case, you are indubitably my landlady," he acknowledged. "Will you come in?" And this time he stood aside to let her pass.

But she still hesitated on the doorstep.

"I won't if you don't want me to," she said. "I can say all I've got to say out here, if you prefer."

"I'd like you to come in," he answered simply.

Judy came in promptly.

"I'm so glad," she returned, holding out her hand. "Because I think tenants and landlords—landladies, I mean"—correcting herself with a smile—"should at least *try* to be friends. It's such an impossible relationship otherwise, isn't it?"

Blake led the way into the living-room, and a brief conversation ensued in regard to the cottage and fields which, since they completed a corner of their property, the owners of Boscowen had been in the habit of renting from the Trethry estate, and afterwards he went in search of some notes he had made concerning certain necessary repairs that Mrs. Sarton expressed her willingness to put in hand. When he returned, he found her standing in front of a framed photograph which had its place on the gate-legged table. She turned impulsively towards him as he re-entered the room.

"So you know—my David Kelly?" she said, pointing to the photo.

Carrington's glance followed the direction of her hand and rested quietly on the pictured face.

"Yes," he answered. "He's about the only real pal I have in the world." Adding, with a whimsical light in his eyes: "I've always thought of him as *my* David Kelly."

She nodded understandingly.

"I know. I believe all his friends think of him like that. And it doesn't make a bit of difference whether you don't see him for a week or six months. He's always just the same David."

There was a warm glow in her voice as she spoke of the one man whose friendship Blake had found to be based on the rock of utter faithfulness, and he responded to it involuntarily. That mutual caring for David Kelly seemed like a link betwixt himself and this friendly, genuine woman, and a few minutes later Kezia received a fresh shock in the

discovery that her master proposed to have yet another lady visitor to tea.

"Do stay," begged Blake. "You can't think what it means to me to meet someone who knows old David. I haven't set eyes on him for about three years."

"No. He's been out in the Straits Settlements. He was one of our neighbours. You know he's coming home to Europe again? He can't stand the climate out there."

"I never supposed he would," said Carrington slowly. "The war left him too much of a crock. I told him that when he first went out. I'm glad he's coming home," he added.

"Not to England, though," vouchsafed Judy quickly. "He couldn't winter here. He's going to the South of France—to Le Geyt. You'll have to go out and see him."

Carrington shook his head.

"I don't see myself on the Riveria," he said, with a grim twist of his mouth—half bitter, half contemptuous. And Judy was conscious of a sudden uprush of pity for this man who was David Kelly's friend and who yet seemed so determinedly lonely and apart.

"Oh, you'll change your mind later on," she said lightly, and then passed easily on to another topic.

Presently she found herself confiding some of the difficulties which faced her in the fulfilling of Wayne's last request.

"I hate meddling," she acknowledged with a rueful smile. "But Harvard wanted me to look after 'his three brats,' as he used to call them, if I could."

"They need it," observed Blake grimly. "Of course, you know they're letting the place go to rack and ruin?"

"I know." Somehow, despite the brusqueness which appeared characteristic of him, she did not experience any difficulty in talking frankly with him, and suddenly conscious of the fact, she commented on it with faint surprise.

"I don't know why I should be pouring all this out to

you," she said. "I think it must be because you're a friend of David's, and I've got used to shifting all my worries on to his shoulders."

"More probably it's because I'm one of the people that don't count," suggested Blake.

"Don't count?"

"No. I'm only a ghost—an onlooker at life."

Again that note of ingrained bitterness had crept into his voice, and Judy, hearing it, felt a fresh impulse of sympathy towards him.

"Well, I'd be grateful if you'd just come to life for a bit and be a pal," she said briskly. "Harvard has asked me to look after those harum-scarum children of his, and I've about as much idea of what to do with them as with a herd of young elephants."

"It's absurd! You're too young to be saddled with them."

"I'm thirty-nine—worse luck!" she volunteered. "*Really* thirty-nine, you know," she added, smiling. "I've not just decided to stop counting birthdays this side of forty."

Blake gave a sudden boyish shout of laughter.

"I think you're about the youngest person I've ever met. That nine without the thirty would be nearer the mark."

That burst of spontaneous laughter was a revelation. Judy could almost divine from it what manner of man he must have been before the grey wall of cynicism had built itself about him—gay, intensely alive, perhaps a shade reckless.

"But seriously," she protested, "I'm rather overwhelmed with a sense of my responsibilities. I don't in the least know what to do with—Pam." As she uttered the name her eyes flashed swiftly up to his face. "The kind of life she's living at Rakehill is frightfully bad for her. Although, I must say," she added, "that it's left her extraordinarily unspoilt. What would you advise me to do—friend of David?"

A long silence followed. Blake walked slowly over to the window and stood with his arms folded, looking out at the grey skies and leafless trees. Judy could not see his expression, but when at last he turned back to her once more his face was very set and stern—the face of a man who had fought something out with himself and won.

"I should take her away," he said slowly. "Take her away from Trelyan."

CHAPTER IX

REVELATION

JUDY gave a good deal of thought to Blake's advice that Pamela would be better away from Trelyan, at least for a time, and it occurred to her that the easiest way of accomplishing such a project was to propose that after Christmas, when Bay had suggested they might spend a few weeks together in the South of France, Pamela should accompany them. It would give the girl a new sense of values, something against which she might measure her life at Rakehill and which would serve to throw the shiftless, Bohemian kind of existence that prevailed there into its right perspective.

The idea of a visit to the Riviera would be certain, she reflected, to appeal enormously to any girl whose whole existence had hitherto been passed in the depths of the country, and Judy, whose own life was in some ways rather an empty one, felt her spirits rise at the prospect of taking Pam to London and buying her a veritable trousseau of the necessary pretty frocks and finally of initiating her into all the delights and gaiety of that golden, sunshiny southern coast.

She was considerably taken aback, therefore, when she bruited her plan, to find it received with frank dismay.

"And leave the hunting?" Pamela had exclaimed, with a face so blank that Judy laughed outright. "Besides"—Pam hesitated a little—"I don't know—I don't think I want to leave Trelyan. I think I should be sort of homesick. Although," she added, with that impulsive warm-

heartedness which made her so essentially lovable, "it's perfectly dear of you to have thought of it, and I feel it's simply horrid of me to refuse."

"You needn't feel like that in the least," Judy had assured her.

For the time being, therefore, the matter dropped, and life went on as usual. But Judy's coming had made a difference which grew more and more perceptible as the weeks ran on until November had slipped into December and at last Christmas itself began to loom on the near horizon.

From the outset she calmly ignored Carrington's expressed intention of leading the life of a recluse. As "David's friend," she called upon him for advice concerning the Trethry property whenever she happened to want it, and she contrived to interest both him and the Wayne trio in the improvements she was bent upon making to the house itself and in the various pieces of furniture she was acquiring—"to fill some long-felt want," as she would laughingly observe, or to take the place of others which she proposed to discard. She would telephone down quite casually to Blake to "come up and see a lovely old Chippendale cabinet I've just picked up and tell me where you think it should go." And since it was really very difficult to turn your prickly side outwards to anyone as genuinely kind-hearted and friendly as Judy Sarton, Carrington would come. More often than not he encountered some of the Waynes there, and in the course of the lively discussions which ensued as to the ultimate disposition of one or other of Judy's "finds," and the intimate little tea-parties in the cosy South Parlour which usually terminated the proceedings, the original feud between the Master of the Foxhounds and the owner of Boscowen gradually healed over.

More than that, both Toby and Bubbles began to learn a new respect for this man who unquestionably interested himself heart and soul in the farming of his property, working as though work for its own sake made some special

appeal to him. Occasionally, almost forced into making comparisons, Toby was even overtaken by an odd, uncomfortable sense of shame when he thought of Rakehill as it was and as it might be—as it certainly would have been if a man like Carrington had owned it, while the lighter-hearted Bubbles maintained that "Blake Carrington wasn't really half a bad sort when you got to know him."

"I shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't suggest that the hounds should meet at Boscowen one of these days," he declared gleefully on one occasion.

But Pam shook her head. Somehow she divined that it was only the fact of Judy's friendship with David Kelly that had drawn Blake to Trethry, and no real change in his attitude towards the world in general. It seemed to her as though for some obscure reason he definitely regarded himself as irrevocably apart, cut off from his fellows. Once, on a daring impulse, she had said as much to him. It happened one evening when he was seeing her home across the fields from Trethry, and his deliberately uttered assent brought the swift colour to her cheeks.

"Yes," he answered. "I am—cut off. That's what I want you to understand."

"You want—me—to understand?" she faltered.

They had reached the Manor gates and Carrington paused, looking down at her, with his hand on the iron latch of the big gates.

"Yes, you," he said. "You more than anyone." And he had turned away abruptly, leaving her to make her way alone up the dusk-enfolded drive. She felt as though he had suddenly, violently, closed a door in her face—a door which the happy, friendly intimacy of the last few weeks at Trethry had been gradually pushing ajar.

The curious changes in Blake's manner towards her—sometimes spontaneously friendly, sometimes morose to the point of actual ill-manners—baffled her completely. There were moments when she could sense something deeper than

mere friendship, in a hurriedly checked phrase or in the expression of his eyes as they rested on her, and then, when she unconsciously responded to that deeper undercurrent, half wonderingly, half fearfully, she would find herself suddenly thrust back into the position of the merest stranger by some harshly uttered word or gesture. It was as if he were aware of the attraction she had for him and were deliberately resisting it. And deep within herself, although as yet she hardly realized it, Pamela reacted to his moods as sensitively as the needle of a compass quivers to the north.

In spite of his inexplicable aloofness, she could not banish him from her thoughts, try as she might, and the ordinary routine of life seemed in some unaccountable way to have lost its savour. Even the approaching prospect of the Cranruth fancy-dress ball, an annual event which took place early in the New Year and usually keyed her up to a fever-heat of anticipation, failed on this occasion to evoke anything more than a rather luke-warm show of interest.

Bubbles, who had been expatiating one afternoon, as they sat on either side of the fire, upon the respective merits and demerits of various costumes, challenged her abruptly with her shortcomings in this respect.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Pam?" he demanded. "You don't seem to care tuppence about the show, and you're generally as keen as mustard. 'Pon my word, anyone might think you were in love!" he wound up indignantly.

Pamela felt a sudden flood of burning colour surge over her face, and hastily snatching up the poker, she woke the fire into fresh life, inwardly praying that the glow of the leaping flames would disguise that betraying flush. All at once she knew why she had been so utterly repelled by Judy's suggestion that she should accompany her to the South of France—knew why she shrank from the bare idea of leaving Trelyan. Bubbles' chance remark, uttered in boy-

ish impatience, had gone home as clean as a rapier and shown her her own heart.

Hitherto she had been like a little child stumbling in the dark, blindly conscious of fugitive moments when the thrill of some quivering, inexplicable ecstasy raced through her veins like fire, of other moments when pain, indefinite and equally inexplicable, tugged dully at her consciousness. And now, in a flash, like lightning cleaving a storm-dark sky and making the whole world beneath its transcendently clear, had come this sudden revelation of the truth.

It left her shaken and breathless, for with that inner, rapturous glow which is born of love's first recognition came also the agony of not knowing—not knowing whether the love she had given were returned or not. Those sudden withdrawals, those harsh reticences of Carrington's, denied it wholly, and yet some instinct which goes deeper than the mere face value of either word or action—the secret, mystic instinct which tells us when we are beloved—forbade the absolute acceptance of that denial.

Words, phrases, savagely bitten off into silence as they sprang to his lips, came back to her. They had hurt at the time, those suddenly closed doors. Now the very harshness of their clangour seemed to hold some kind of dreary comfort. If they were but the bars to hold back a love in some incomprehensible way forbidden! . . . She knew nothing of Blake's former life before he had come to Trelyan. It was sealed away behind that bitter, stern-shut mouth. He might be shackled, bound in some way by cords that stretched into the past. If it were only that . . . if she were only sure—*sure* that he cared, she felt she could bear no matter what it was that stood between them and love's consummation. But she might never know—never know if he really cared or if she had bestowed her love unasked.

To men it is at least given to free themselves from the torment of uncertainty, but in that hour of revelation

Pamela passed from girlhood into womanhood, and woman's burden of enforced silence was bound upon her shoulders. Yet, even so, she did not flinch from the truth or try to cheat herself. She was too honest for that—honest to the core of her—and whether Blake had given her love or only friendship, she knew that now and for the rest of life her love was his unalterably.

CHAPTER X

THE BLACK MASK

THE old square building which Cranruth designated its town hall lent itself quite adaptably to the purposes of a dance. It boasted pillar-guarded alcoves and odd, delightful corners in plenty, and the roofed balcony which ran outside the upper story, and from which were made prosaic public announcements such as the name of the successful candidate at an election, became transformed on festive occasions into a dim, mysterious alley, lit by swaying Chinese lanterns and softly carpeted for light-shod feet to walk on.

On the night of the fancy-dress ball even the four-square ugliness of the central hall itself had undergone an amazing metamorphosis. The wooden rafters which arched from wall to wall below the pointed ceiling were screened from sight by trails of smilax, while the platform, where prosy speakers not infrequently bored their audiences beyond endurance, was converted into a leafy bower, gemmed with clusters of mistletoe and scarlet-berried holly, whence issued the strains of the orchestra.

A lively fox-trot had just drawn to a conclusion, and Lucian Gale, Pamela's partner, had gone off in search of an iced drink for her, leaving her installed in a small recess, curtained off from the remainder of the hall. From here, through the gap betwixt curtain and pillar, she could see him threading his way amongst the throng of masqueraders, the lights gleaming freakishly on the glittering harlequin costume which fitted his supple young figure like a

sheath. She herself had been finally goaded by Bubbles into evincing a certain feminine interest in her dress for the occasion, and had evolved a modernized version of Columbine carried out in a beech-leaf gold that matched her hair, with big black pompoms adorning cap, and shoes, and the short frilly skirts beneath which twinkled a pair of slim black legs.

But the wild spirits which had carried her through the Rakehill supper-party were conspicuously absent to-night. When Loo had disappeared from view into a room at the further end of the hall, she sat listlessly watching the shifting medley of figures as they moved to and fro. They reminded her somehow of the changeful, coloured pieces in a kaleidoscope. Now they joined up in groups, now scattered again into twos and threes, only to reform in clusters when some tit-bit of local gossip drew them together once more.

It was a gay enough scene. Pompadours and pierrots, Royalist cavaliers and Spanish grandees, jostled one against the other. Here, a demure little Quakeress in sober grey, with collars and cuffs of finest lawn; here, a royal Cleopatra, ablaze with jewels and girdled round her slender hips with a ruby-eyed snake. Masks were *de rigueur,* and Pamela proceeded to while away the time by trying to identify the wearers of the various costumes. It was much more difficult than she had imagined it would be, and she was gradually losing her listlessness and becoming quite absorbed in the game when suddenly someone drew aside the curtain which partially concealed her retreat and a light, amused voice remarked:

"They're such a darned pretty pair of legs that I'm perfectly certain they can dance. May I have the pleasure of the next, Miss Columbine?"

Pamela sat up hastily and regarded the intruder with mingled surprise and resentment. His hair was concealed beneath a powdered peruke, and he wore an elaborate bro-

caded coat and waistcoat with a drift of cobwebby lace at his wrists, while his satin knee-breeches and silk stockings revealed a pair of legs which, on more masculine lines, were quite as shapely as the ones upon which he had just commented.

She wondered who he was. That he was a stranger to Cranruth she felt convinced. She scrutinized his face, but without finding any clue to his identity. A narrow strip of black velvet masked the upper part of his features, revealing beneath a strong, somewhat beaky nose a long-lipped mouth and one of those conquering stubborn chins which discount the value of any kind of opposition almost before it is attempted. Through the slits in the mask she could discern dark, sparkling eyes.

"Well, Columbine, will you dance with me?" he repeated.

There was so much assurance in his voice, such an audacious assumption that her answer would be an affirmative one, that her whole feminine soul instantly rose up in revolt. She shook her head.

"I'm dancing—naturally—with Harlequin," she returned coldly.

"Yes, I saw you," he replied, unabashed.

Pam repressed a little start of surprise. It was not just by chance, then, that he had discovered her retreat; he had been watching her for some time.

"But neither Harlequin nor anyone else could leave you alone—and expect to find you in the same solitary state on his return. The thing's absurd!" he pursued.

"He's not—left me. He's gone to fetch me some iced cup."

The black mask threw a glance over his shoulder.

"By Jove! And here he comes, bearing his sheaves with him," he observed. He turned round, coolly blocking the entrance to the alcove, and held out his hand for the glass which Loo carried. "I'll give that to Miss Wayne,"

he said easily. "She's dancing the next with me." And as Loo had no reason for supposing the statement to be otherwise than the truth—since the tall man in the rather splendid costume might quite probably be an acquaintance of Pam's—he surrendered the glass and went off in search of his next partner.

"Hock-cup. Is that what you wanted?" demanded the unknown, turning back to Pamela as calmly as though his behaviour were quite the most natural thing in the world.

She nodded. Against her will she felt herself thawing towards him. There was a certain gay, imperious charm of manner about him that was somehow difficult to resist.

"Aren't you rather a high-handed person?" she asked, as she sipped her hock-cup. "And who told you my name?"

"The last shall be first," he replied. "I happened to know that Miss Wayne's costume was that of a columbine in black and yellow. There being only one such costume in the room, the rest was easy."

"And as to the high-handedness?" she persisted, wondering a little what excuse he would make.

He made none.

"Oh, do you call it that?"—airily. "I call it knowing just what you want and going all out to get it."

Pamela regarded him curiously. Behind the lightly uttered words she sensed a driving-force that drew from her another question.

"Is that what you usually do?"

"Invariably," he answered, with a slight bow.

"But you don't always succeed," she returned hastily.

"That depends upon just how badly I want a thing. In this instance"—she was conscious of a swift, raking glance from the eyes which sparkled behind the black velvet mask—"in this instance I wanted that dance enormously. Listen! It's just beginning. Let's go!" As he spoke, the band broke into another fox-trot.

Pamela set down her glass and half rose from her chair.

There was something compelling in that gay, persuasive voice mingling with the syncopated rhythm of the music.

"I suppose it's no use refusing such a determined person," she said, smiling.

"Not the least," he averred. "Come—it's a topping fox-trot," he added with a sudden boyishness that was rather disarming.

He held out his hands—strong, well-kept hands beneath their ruffles of Mechlin lace—and, laying hers within them, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. The next moment they were sailing away together over the polished floor.

He danced well. Somehow she had known that he would. He was the type of man who would do well anything that he attempted to do, she thought. There was something amazingly vital about him which precluded the very idea of failure. Yet, notwithstanding his undeniable charm and that vital quality which carried one away in a rather unexpected fashion, she was aware at the same time of an oddly contradictory feeling—too slight and nebulous for her to label it with a name. It was not exactly fear. Rather, it was a perception of the fact that fear of this man was within the bounds of possibility. There was something primitive about him—a certain dominant force underlying even his lightest words which was a little frightening. She could imagine occasions when no conventional observance or rules would hold him back from doing precisely what he wished.

Somewhat to her surprise, when the dance was over, he accepted his dismissal without protest. But he tranquilly claimed another dance later on.

"You'll give me the fifth after this, won't you?" he said. And constrained, partly by curiosity, partly by that odd quality of dominance which seemed part of the man's make-up, she yielded a half-unwilling acquiescence.

When he had left her the momentary interest aroused by his somewhat unusual personality faded, and she found

herself once more a prey to the same listlessness which had possessed her earlier in the evening. She felt disinclined to dance. The light-hearted conversation of her various partners had struck her as curiously vapid and inane, and she herself seemed to have lost most of her customary zest and sparkle. Throwing a light fur wrap round her shoulders, she slipped out of the gaily decorated hall and sought refuge in a deserted ante-room.

A small fire burned in the grate, and the room, prepared for possible sitters-out, was dimly lit with coloured fairy lamps. A heavy portiere of velvet screened it off from a committee-room with which it connected, and for the time being, at least, Pam felt she would be secure from interruption. Removing her mask, she established herself in a low, cushioned arm-chair and closed her eyes. From the ballroom came the strains of a popular fox-trot and the whispering shuffle of sliding feet, mingling together into a soothing blur of sound, and for a short space she rested, mind and body temporarily relaxed.

All at once a burst of clapping broke out, and she opened her eyes drowsily. People were applauding a favourite tune and an instant later the band resumed playing. And then, across her partially reawakened senses, cut a sentence which startled her into vivid consciousness again. It drifted out from the adjoining committee-room.

"What I want to know, Mr. Bubbles Wayne, is how I'm going to see my money back again. Three thousand is a large sum—a very large sum—to have advanced upon a place that is being let down in the way your brother is letting down Rakehill." It was spoken very quietly, in a smooth, rather oily voice which betrayed a slight tendency to blur the letter "s" and substitute "ith" for "is."

Pamela knew in a moment who the speaker must be. It was Abner Barstein—the money-lender who, by dint of the financial hold he possessed over many of the big landowners in the Cranruth district, had contrived to push himself and

his pretty daughter Vera into society which would not otherwise have tolerated either of them. The masqued ball at the town hall had presented comparatively few difficulties. There were too many members of the organizing committee who had been caught in Barstein's toils for him not to have been invited to take tickets for it. But there were still certain houses in the neighbourhood whose doors were firmly closed both to him and to his daughter, and it was the aim and object of his existence to unlock those doors.

"I know it's a large sum." It was Bubbles who was speaking now, his frank, boyish voice contrasting curiously with the other's smooth and measured accents. "You had better speak to my brother about it."

Pamela sat rigid in her chair, her hands gripping the arms. What did it mean? Three thousand—three thousand pounds advanced upon Rakehill! She had expected to hear Bubbles thunderously deny it. But, instead, he had admitted it. It must be true. Toby had been borrowing—borrowing for some time, it seemed. And unknown to her! Even in the midst of the shock and bewilderment caused by the sudden revelation she was conscious of a raw, hurt feeling that the boys should have withheld this knowledge from her—had not confided in her. And then all personal feeling was swept away on the tide of sheer terror which swept over her at the vastness of the sum involved and the certain inability of Toby to repay it. What would happen? Would they take Rakehill away from them? Rakehill—home! The place of which she worshipped every stone, every sod of turf. . . .

These thoughts—wordless, chaotic—raced through her mind. During the brief pause which elapsed between Bubbles' brusque reply and Barstein's next speech she visualized in a flash of insight the whole situation and its relative possibilities.

She sprang up from her chair, intending to break in

upon the two men. But some instinct held her back. If she were to help matters—if it were possible to help!—she must know the whole truth, all that was involved. Deliberately she forced herself to sit down once more and listen.

"I know it's a large sum. You'd better talk to my brother about it."

She heard Barstein give a litle laugh. It was not a very pleasant laugh.

"What good would that do? Can he pay—even the interest owing?"

"How much is there owing?"

"Just at the moment, three hundred pounds. In another six months it will be——"

"Oh, never mind what it'll be in another six months!" broke in Bubbles bluntly. "You're not likely to get the three hundred. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes, I know it." Pamela could imagine the nod—the acquiescent, oily nod which would accompany the words. "And as the money is lent on mortgage, I could of course foreclose." Barstein paused. "I should be sorry—very sorry indeed—to foreclose, Mr. Wayne."

"Would you?" Bubbles' young voice was bitter. "I very much doubt it."

"You need not. Rakehill is a beautiful property. At least it could be made a beautiful property again with a little money and work put into it."

"Then, as I said before, you'd better talk to my brother about it."

"I don't think so—I don't think so. I would rather talk to you, Mr. Bubbles."

"Me? And why the devil should you want to talk to me? D'you think I'm a kind of Crœsus in disguise? You ought to know better—you've lent me a pony often enough—and had it back with interest, too!"

"Yes, you've always squared up your accounts honour-

ably—like a gentleman, Mr. Wayne." Bubbles' hand clenched behind his back. He would like to have hit the man across his sleek, ingratiating face. "And that's why I'd like to have a little conversation with you."

"All right. Get on with it, then."

"It's touching my daughter—Vera."

"Vera! burst out Bubbles. "Oh, I say"—distastefully—"keep her name out of it. She's not on in this scene."

"But she might be—very much 'on in this scene,' as you say—he! he! You've paid her a good deal of attention, you know, Mr. Wayne, from time to time. A good deal of attention——"

"I've not! Nothing more than I've paid any other girl. I admit I like talking to Vera—she's a good sport."

"Well, well, you may not have thought of it like that," —indulgently. "But I'm afraid my little girl has taken it all rather more seriously. She's—very fond of you, is Vera——"

Bubbles blushed to the roots of his hair. "Oh, I say!——" he began again desperately.

Mr. Barstein waved him into silence.

"As I was saying, you've paid her a good deal of attention, and I'm not displeased to see it. Not at all displeased. It may be the means of our arranging matters comfortably together. Very comfortably indeed."

"I'm afraid——" Once more Bubbles' half-uttered remark was dismissed with the wave of a fat beringed hand.

"It's this way. Business is business, and as it stands I've every right to foreclose over the three thousand. But —well, it would be quite the same thing between relatives. I shouldn't want to put my"—Barstein paused a moment, significantly—"*son-in-law's* family to any inconvenience. None whatever."

Bubbles found himself struggling with a torrent of words that strove wildly for utterance. And while he was still floundering, old Barstein edged away towards the door.

"Think it over, my boy. Think it well over," he counselled, and sidled out of the room.

A minute later Bubbles wrenched aside the portiere and came striding blindly into the ante-room. He had almost cannoned into Pam's chair before he saw that she was sitting there. He pulled himself up abruptly.

"You here?" he exclaimed.

She looked up and nodded mutely. His white, worried young face hurt her inside somehow so that for a moment she could not speak.

"Then—then"—a dark flush suddenly staining the pallor of his skin—"then you heard?"

"Yes, I heard." The aching constraint which had held her gave way. "Oh, Bubbles!" she burst out. "What a perfect old beast Barstein is!"

Bubbles flung himself into a chair.

" 'M," he agreed laconically. "And he's got me in a trap, if ever a man had. Don't you see"—speaking all at once very rapidly—"if I don't marry the girl, he's going to come down on Toby for the whole bally amount we owe him and foreclose if we can't pay. . . . And we can't!"

"Three thousand pounds! It's ghastly. How—how on earth did Toby come to borrow so much?" she asked timidly. "There's a certain amount comes in from the farm and from rents and so on, isn't there?"

"Yes. But it's always a few hundreds a year less than we spend, confound it! Even in Dad's days we used to borrow from old Barstein——"

"*Dad* borrowed from him?" faltered Pamela strickenly.

"Yes. Of course, you didn't know—nor did I, at the time. But he'd never have kept the hounds going otherwise. Running a pack of hounds isn't precisely a cheap amusement."

"No, I know." Looking back, Pam could realize that quite a good many things they had been in the habit of doing at Rakehill weren't precisely cheap amusements.

"And now old Barstein's got us fairly between his thumb and finger," went on Bubbles gloomily. "It's a case of marrying Vera—or going broke. I'm hanged if I know which is the worse," he added with a rather unsteady laugh.

Pamela looked at him—at the good clean length of him, at his handsome, clouded young face, and recognized the indefinable something—that something which is born of race and environment and a certain inherited standard of values—which stamped him so indelibly, notwithstanding all his faults and failings, as of another world than that of Vera Barstein and her kind. Dimly she could vision the irretrievable ruin which must necessarily follow such a hopeless mismating—either a lifetime of discord and cross-purposes, with Bubbles' happy, lovable nature jarred and irritated into bitterness, or else Bubbles sinking to his wife's level, acquiring her sordid Barstein outlook, gradually, imperceptibly adapting himself to the mental atmosphere which surrounded him. It didn't bear thinking about.

"You *can't* marry her, Bubbles! You shan't!" she exclaimed fiercely, all the mothering, protective instinct which lies dormant in every woman springing into life.

"I don't want to," admitted Bubbles. "Although, to give the girl her due, she's quite a good sort—to talk to and all that. And, honest injun'! I've done no more. It nearly knocked me flat when old Barstein as good as said she was ready to marry me," he pursued, with an ingenuous blush.

Pamela smiled a little to herself. Notwithstanding all the spoiling he received at the hands of women, Bubbles was the most modest of young men and never imagined, as would many another man in his position, that they were tumbling over each other to marry him. He was quite simply and frankly delighted that they liked to

have him with them, and that was all there was to it. And Pam loved him for it.

"Oh, yes, she's all right," she replied vaguely, her thoughts busy with the matter of how he was to be extricated from the trap old Abner Barstein had set for him. "Tell me, Bubbles, is Mr. Barstein within his rights in—in foreclosing?"

"Well, yes, if we don't pay the interest owing."

"The interest!" Pamela almost pounced on the word. "Then he can't demand the whole three thousand?"

"Not for a long time if we pay the interest according to the arrangement he has with us. He renewed it with Toby, you know, when—after the Dad's death."

"I see. And how much is the interest?"

"Three hundred overdue, but as the old brute pointed out, there'll be a thumping lot more in another six months."

Pamela sprang to her feet.

"Then we'll pay it!"

Bubbles stared at her in astonishment.

"Pay it! But, my dear girl, at the present moment Toby couldn't lay his hand on three hundred pounds—or three hundred anything. He's overdrawn at the bank, as it is."

"Never mind." Pam's eyes were brilliant. "That interest's going to be paid—and the next instalment too. Don't worry how it's going to be done, Bubbles"—as she met his incredulous eyes. "I know what I'm talking about, and although it doesn't clear away the whole difficulty, it *does* give us a breathing-space. Just—trust me. I've never let you down yet, have I?"

"No, by Jove, you haven't!" exclaimed Bubbles heartily.

"And I won't this time, either. You needn't"—on a breath betwixt tears and laughter—"be screwing up your courage to marry Miss Barstein yet, at any rate."

"Thanks be!" ejaculated Bubbles piously. He slipped

a boyish arm awkwardly round her shoulder and stooping his head, so that the lights flickered across his bright hair, kissed her impulsively.

"This is our dance," said a voice.

With a stifled exclamation Pam dragged herself out of Bubbles' embrace and whirled round. In the committee-room doorway, one lace-ruffled hand holding back the curtain, stood the black mask with whom she had danced earlier in the evening. There was an untranslatable expression about his mouth, and the eyes which were fixed upon her through the slits in the strip of black velvet which he still wore seemed to her to hold a curious smouldering light.

CHAPTER XI

SEA MIST

BUBBLES had gone, and Pamela and the man in the black mask stood silently facing each other in the little ante-room. Suddenly he laughed.

"I feel sorely tempted to follow our young friend's laudable example," he remarked dryly.

He made no movement towards her, but there was so strong a suggestion of motion in the tense lines of his body—of motion temporarily held in check—that instinctively Pam drew back a few steps.

"You needn't be afraid," he said, observing her strategic retreat. "I'm not going to attempt it."

"You certainly are not," she retorted coldly. Then, desirous of explaining that impetuous hug of Bubbles', she added: "Our 'young friend,' as you call him, happens to be my brother."

He made her a half-mocking obeisance.

"You've effectually quenched my envy," he returned lightly. "I've not the remotest wish to be—your brother. Shall we dance?" But lightly though he spoke, there lurked a deeper undercurrent to the jesting words. It was like the stirring of something hidden, waking into life—the tentative beating of a pulse.

Pamela returned no answer. She had been too worried over Bubbles' affairs to feel in the mood for a battle of wits with this irrepressible person who appeared to her to be completely impervious to snubs. He either calmly refused to see them, or, if he saw them, turned their

point aside so engagingly that it was almost impossible to be indignant with him.

Her silence seemed to strike him. He glanced at her face with sudden keenness.

"Or are you too tired to dance? You look somehow played out?"

The unexpected kindness in his voice touched her.

"I think I am rather tired—and hot," she admitted. "Would you mind if we sat this out—somewhere where there's a little air, for preference!"

"I can make a better suggestion than that. My car's outside, it's a glorious night—let me take you for a run along the coast road."

The suggestion was one after Pam's own heart. She loved the sea and the night, and the idea of rushing off for a midnight spin in someone's car, with its slight flavour of impropriety—enough, at least, to shock the decorous provincial minds of her Trelyan neighbors—appealed to the rebel spirit within her at once. And then, like a flash, came the remembrance of Blake Carrington's grave, rebuking eyes on the night he had brought Tatters back to Rakehill and had discovered her in the ballroom, seated on Loo's shoulder, while the dance eddied wildly round them. He had been thoroughly disapproving, that she knew. And something told her that just in the same way he would disapprove of this proposed escapade with the man in the black mask.

A queer little pain tugged at her heart, yet even as she recognized its meaning her woman's pride resented it. Why should she consider in the least what Blake thought? He didn't care anything about her. She knew that now. Latterly, indeed, it seemed to her he had almost gone out of his way to emphasize the fact. The memory of one recent incident leapt to her mind with startling vividness. She had been discussing with

him the prospect of to-night's ball, and, unconsciously driven by the inner longing for his near presence, she had suggested that he should come to it.

"It's five years since I danced," he had answered. "I've forgotten how." There had been a curious expression in his eyes as he spoke, as though his thoughts were turned inward upon some painful recollection.

"You could begin again, though," she protested.

He shook his head.

"As I've told you once before—for some of us there's no 'beginning again.'"

Engrossed in her idea of persuading him to come to the dance, she missed the bitter implication which lay beneath the surface meaning of the words.

"Well, you could at least sit out and talk to people," she persisted gaily. "Do come." And then, on a sudden feminine impulse, she had added: "To please me."

"I'm afraid even that inducement leaves me cold," he answered. She felt as though he had struck her across the face. The snub had been so direct, so unmistakable. Even now it seemed to her that she could still feel the burning blush which had tingled through her whole body at the cool, indifferent speech.

"Well?" The black mask had been quietly watching Pamela's face as these thoughts sped through her mind. "Are you hesitating on the score of propriety? You needn't—because in reality I'm a very old friend. I've known you since you were about three."

She stared at him.

"You've known me since I was three?" she echoed in bewildered tones.

"Yes. Although, to be sure"—the flexible, long-lipped mouth tilted to an amused smile—"not very intimately. But we can rectify that now."

"Who—who are you?" demanded Pamela.

With a quick gesture he whipped off his mask, revealing a pair of quizzical dark eyes that laughed at her from beneath very difinitely marked brows.

"I'm Bay Sarton—and completely at your service."

"Judy's step-son!" exclaimed Pam, suddenly enlightened.

He nodded.

"Yes. So you see it would be perfectly respectable for you to come for a run in my car. Why, I'm next door to being your guardian, if you only look at the matter intelligently."

Pamela laughed outright.

"So you are!" she assented gaily.

"Then you'll come?"

"I'll come."

"Good. Run and get a wrap or coat or something and I'll meet you at the foot of the steps with the car."

A few minutes later a slim, cloaked figure sped almost unnoticed down the town hall steps to where a small two-seater stood in the roadway, panting to be gone.

"Warm enough?" queried Sarton as he drew the fur rug round Pam's knees.

"Quite." She answered him brightly. Her fatigue of a few moments before had left her, and with it the apathy which had weighed her down throughout the greater part of the evening. A sense of adventure was upon her, and as she snuggled down beneath the supple fur laprobe he had tucked around her she forgot the things that had been worrying and fretting her and yielded to the spirit of the moment.

The car slipped away through the empty streets, and soon they had left the town behind them and were well away on the country road which followed the curving coast-line. Pam drew a deep breath of satisfaction. The cool night-air blew softly against her hot cheeks, and the dim, shadowy landscape, touched into mystery by a

thin mist which glimmered palely beneath the moon, came restfully to eyes fresh from the glare of artificial light. There was a faint tang in the air, wafted up from the sea, which lay very deep and still and calm to-night at the foot of the ragged cliffs.

Somewhat to her own surprise, she found she had no inclination to talk. The rhythmic beat of the engine and the cool, enfolding peace of the night held a curiously tranquillizing influence, and for a little while she leaned back in the car, content with the sense of being borne effortlessly along through the quiet country-side.

It was Sarton who finally broke the silence which had descended between them.

"Evidently you don't suffer from curiosity," he remarked at last, in a voice which held a slight note of exasperation.

Pamela came abruptly out of the reverie into which she had fallen.

"What made you say that?" she asked.

"Well, most women would at least have had the curiosity to inquire how I happened to be at the town hall to-night. You appear to take it for granted that an acquaintance of about eleven years ago should suddenly drop down on you from the clouds, so to speak."

A small smile of amusement curved her mouth as she detected the flavour of annoyance which lay behind his comment. Man-like, he had expected a little fuss to be made about his unlooked-for arrival, and she had omitted to fulfil his expectations. Probably his sentiments were on a par with those of someone who has told a good story and failed to elicit a smile.

"But of course I wondered about it," she declared, tactfully hastening to repair her remissness. "Only I was really enjoying this spin too much to want to talk. Tell me, have you only arrived to-day? I thought Judy wasn't expecting you until next week."

"She wasn't. But she happened to say something about

this fancy-dress ball affair in one of her letters, so I thought I'd run down in time for it."

Pam looked puzzled.

"Then why didn't you come to the town hall with Judy and the rest of us? She drove us all three down in her car, you know. She never even mentioned your arrival."

He chuckled enjoyably.

"No. I expressly forbade her to tell anyone I was here. I preferred coming as a free-lance."

"You absurd person! Whatever for?"

"Because," he answered deliberately, "I wanted to make acquaintance with people incognito. It's a more amusing—and much more satisfactory—way of getting to know what people are really like."

"And I suppose, if you'd found us all excessively dull and boring, you'd have returned to Leicestershire post-haste and we should none of us have been the wiser?"

He laughed.

"That would have been one possibility, wouldn't it?" he admitted.

"When do you return?" asked Pam demurely.

He threw her a quick glance, his hand steady on the wheel.

"I don't return," he said quietly. "I stay here."

Once again she was conscious of that queer little thrill of fear—or rather of the fear of being afraid—with which he had inspired her earlier in the evening. With an effort she forced herself to meet his gaze and to make some laughing rejoinder, but she felt almost glad when, turning the corner at the foot of a steep descent known as the Devil's Slide, the car ran suddenly into a bank of white low-lying mist and Sarton was compelled to focus all his attention on the matter of driving.

The mist thickened rapidly as they plunged deeper into the valley, and a muttered ejaculation escaped him as he slackened the car's pace.

"Confound it! I hope there isn't much more of this," he muttered, pushing on cautiously.

Pamela peered ahead with some anxiety. She knew these ground-mists, produced by certain temperatures, only too well. On horseback you might get through them without losing your way, trusting to the instinct of the animal underneath you; she had accomplished it successfully on more than one occasion when returning home from hunting.

But to negotiate one's way through a thick sea mist in a car was a very different proposition. In such a case the head-lights were worse than useless, merely throwing back a bewildering white glare from the surrounding curtain of fog, and it was a matter of luck whether you kept in the middle of the road, or ran up the side of the hedge and tipped over, or stranded your car hopelessly in the patch of soft, boggy ground which often intervened between the roadway and the hedge itself.

"Devil take it! I wish I knew the road a bit," said Sarton, under his breath.

"There's a right-hand turn we must take some distance further on," Pam informed him. "Then the road mounts again, and if we can get as far as that I think we shall find it much clearer. When there's a fog it always lies thickest along this valley."

"Let's pray we get there, then," he replied.

She glanced behind her, wondering whether it would still be possible to return by the way they had come instead of going on. But the outlook to the rear was equally as unpromising as that ahead. The mist seemed to be coming up all round them, rolling inland in thick, vaporous waves. Already the hedges were lost to sight and the car appeared to be moving through an opaque white sea.

"I'll have to pull up, I'm afraid," said Sarton, at last. "I've no idea whether we're in the middle of the road or not. If you'll wait a few minutes, I'll get out and take

my bearings. We don't want to stay here all night," he added with a laugh, "if we can get through this bad patch."

He threw aside the rug from his knees and scrambled out of the car, and an instant later he had scrambled from sight into the mist. For the first time Pam was conscious of a sensation of fear. Supposing he wandered too far from the vicinity of the car and was unable to find his way back to it! It was so easy—so terribly easy to lose one's sense of direction in a fog. She wished she had cautioned him—warned him not to venture too far away.

The minutes dragged by. She sat very still, her hands locked together, conscious of the intense silence of the fog-ridden night which seemed to close round her like an impenetrable wall. A sense of utter loneliness, of being cut off from the rest of the world, overwhelmed her, and with every added moment of Sarton's absence her fear deepened that he had lost his way. She felt she should scream if he didn't come back soon. And then, just as it seemed to her that she couldn't endure the awful silence and loneliness an instant longer, she heard footsteps and Bay's figure loomed suddenly out of the surrounding fog. She caught her lower lip between her teeth in an effort to choke back the sob of utter thankfulness which rose in her throat.

"All serene," he sang out. "We're still in the middle of the road, and the turning you spoke of isn't very far away. We'll make a good try for it." And he clambered back into his seat.

"How did you find your way?" she asked. But the strain of those few interminable moments alone in the fog had shaken her more than she knew, and, in spite of herself, her voice quivered uncontrollably.

"Hullo! You're frightened!" In an instant he had slipped a friendly arm round her shoulder. "I oughtn't

to have left you," he added remorsefully. "I didn't expect I should be so long."

"It's stupid of me," she answered, more steadily by reason of that reassuring arm. "I shouldn't have felt in the least nervous on horseback. But I know nothing at all about a car, and I couldn't help feeling how awful it would be if you couldn't find your way back."

"You could have tootled the horn as a last resort," he suggested. "Then I could have tracked you down by the sound."

"I should never even have thought of that," she admitted rather shamefacedly.

"Your ignorance of the possibilities of a car is evidently colossal," he replied with mock gravity. "It will have to be remedied. I shall take it upon me to teach you how to drive."

"Oh, will you? I'd love it," she exclaimed.

"Good. I'll guarantee you shall be a competent chauffeuse by the time I've finished with you. But, meanwhile, let's get out of this mess first."

He let in the clutch and the car moved slowly forward. Little by little they advanced, creeping steadily along until it seemed to Pamela that ere this they ought certainly to have reached the turning in the road. Apparently the same thought presented itself to Sarton.

"It seems a devil of a way to that turning," he muttered. "Surely we've not passed it?"

The words had hardly died on the mist-laden air when Pam felt the car give a sickening lurch, followed by the jar of brakes suddenly applied. Then it tilted forward and began to sink slowly by the head. . . .

CHAPTER XII

CROSSED SWORDS

"WHERE on earth is Pam?"

It was three o'clock in the morning, and Judy had shepherded her small flock together, preparatory to starting for home, only to find that one of her three protégés was missing.

Toby looked vaguely round the hall.

"I don't know," he returned. "I thought she was with you. Come to think of it, I haven't seen her about for some time."

"When I last saw her," volunteered Bubbles, "she was just going to dance with a man rigged out in a splendacious eighteenth-century costume—chap wearing a black mask."

Judy turned quickly towards him.

"That would be my step-son, Bay," she said, adding with a laugh: "He insisted upon coming to the dance incognito. That's why I never mentioned his arrival to any of you."

A chorus of surprise greeted this communication. When it had subsided, Toby returned to the subject of Pamela's disappearance.

"Well, if we could find your step-son, perhaps he might be able to give us a clue as to Pam's whereabouts," he suggested.

A little worried frown dented itself betwixt Mrs. Sarton's pretty brows.

"I do hope——" She broke off and began again. "I

wish we could find Pam," she said, a note of anxiety in her voice.

"Oh, we'll find her right enough," Toby assured her. "You sit down, Judy, and we'll scatter and look for her. Hi! Lucian!"—as the latter almost brushed him in passing. "Have you seen my young sister about? Mrs. Sarton wants to go home and we can't find Pam anywhere."

Loo pulled up, but he had no information to give regarding Pamela's movements. People were standing about in groups, preparing to leave. A few of the most ardent spirits were still dancing, but neither amongst those who were grouped about the doorway nor amongst the last determined dancers was there any sign of Pamela.

"We'll have a look round," said Toby, and accordingly he and Loo and Bubbles scattered to search for her in various directions.

Somehow the news soon spread abroad that Miss Wayne could not be found, and Judy was annoyed to discern one or two women exchanging significant and none too kindly smiles. The local doctor's wife, a rather gossipy type of woman, shook her head meaningly.

"You're waiting for Pamela, I hear," she said, coming fussily up to Mrs. Sarton. "Ah! I'm afraid that will always be the trouble nowadays. She's never been used to chaperonage, like other girls of her age—more's the pity!"

"Oh, I expect she's only sitting out somewhere, returned Judy coldly. "It's my own fault for not telling her what time I thought of leaving."

"I don't suppose it would have made much difference if you had," commented the other rather venomously.

Judy suppressed a sudden desire to laugh. It was all so paltry and small-minded, this attempt to make trouble out of nothing at all, but even she herself began to feel somewhat concerned when the three boys returned and

reported the only news they had been able to glean—namely, that an attendant on duty at the main entrance had seen Miss Wayne leave the town hall in someone's two-seater car.

"Perhaps she wasn't feeling well and got Bay to drive her home," suggested Judy, trying to reassure herself. "Toby—just to make sure—ring up the Manor and find out if Pam is there."

But old Williams, at the other end of the wire, reported that Miss Wayne had not returned home, and a similar telephone inquiry to Trethry elicited the reply that Mr. Sarton had not returned either.

Judy went a little white.

"Toby," she said, drawing him aside. "I think I'm frightened. Bay's such a harum-scarum creature—he might have driven off with her on any wild-goose chase, and he doesn't know these roads round here a bit. They may have come to grief somewhere. What shall we do?"

"I'd scour the country," answered Toby, "if I'd got a horse handy. But I'm afraid I'm no earthly good with a car. I wish"—irritably—"Pam wouldn't play such fool tricks, running off like this without a word to anyone."

Judy reflected a moment. Then she said determinedly: "I'm going to ring up Blake Carrington."

Somehow she felt that Blake was the man for an emergency like this. She had no compunction about dragging him out of bed in the small hours of the morning. Her anxiety concerning Pam's safety overrode everything else.

"Don't worry." His voice came over the wire very steady and reassuring. I'll dress and come along as quickly as the car can bring me. I may even meet your step-son and Pamela on the road."

So Judy tried to restrain her anxiety till he came, but when he arrived—in an amazingly short space of time which witnessed to the pace at which he must have driven—he had no good news to give her. Bay Sarton and Pamela

were certainly not on the main road which ran between Boscowen and Cranruth.

"There are only two other ways they could have taken," said Blake. "They must either have gone beyond Cranruth and on to the London road, or else run back along the coast road. The best thing would be if your car explored in the London road direction, while I slip along the coast road."

"I shall come with you," said Judy quickly. "Toby and Bubbles can go in my car. Blake"—she laid her hand beseechingly on his arm. "You don't think anything —anything has happened, do you?"

Carrington's expression was non-committal.

"I can't think that any man in his senses would be fool enough to be driving a girl all over the country at this time in the morning just for the fun of the thing," he said sharply. "That's why I'm afraid there may have been an accident. Not necessarily a serious one," he added, as he saw Judy's face whiten.

A few minutes later the two cars, according to Blake's suggestion, were speeding in opposite directions. A light mist still veiled the roads, but it was disappearing rapidly, swept away by the breeze which had sprung up, and the big car raced along with Blake leaning forward a little over the wheel, almost as though he were urging her on to yet further speed, his keen blue eyes raking the vague ribbon of road as it unwound before him. Judy sat beside him without speaking, quietly intent and alert. Presently they came to the Devil's Slide, ran smoothly down, and turned into the valley where the fog had lain so thickly earlier in the night. There was hardly a trace of it left now, and the valley road stretched before them straight and broad to where, a couple of miles ahead, it branched off to right and left.

They sped onward, and then, all at once, through the

pale half-light which precedes the dawn, a dark, blurred bulk, with red lights gleaming, loomed into sight.

"There's the car!" breathed Judy. "Blake, what's happened to it? It looks—very queer." There was a note of apprehension in her voice.

The car was slewed round and curiously tilted. It's back wheels still kept the road, but the bonnet slanted drunkenly forward towards the hedge, while the front wheels were sunk to the depth of several inches in a tract of soft oozy mud which edged the road.

Blake pulled up alongside and, leaping out from his own car, flashed a lamp across the interior of the other. The flare of light revealed Pamela, wrapped from head to foot in a fur lap-robe, sleeping peacefully in the curve of Bay's arm, her head pillowed against his shoulder.

A furious ejaculation escaped Blake's lips. His eyes blazed suddenly. Bay lifted a warning hand.

"'Sh! She's fast asleep," he said quickly.

"So I see," retorted Blake. "Small thanks to you that she isn't half dead."

By this time Judy, too, had descended into the road and was standing beside the bogged two-seater. A low-voiced colloquy followed, Bay briefly explaining how the accident had occurred.

"It was as thick as a London fog, and I missed the turning and ran into this confounded quagmire instead. Give me a hand with the car, will you?" he wound up, addressing Blake.

"It'd need more than you and I to pull her out of that," returned the latter contemptuously. "I've come to take Miss Wayne home. She ought never to have been brought here," he added, with ill-suppressed anger.

At the sound of her own name Pam stirred and opened her eyes.

"Where—where am I?" she murmured drowsily. And

then, slowly waking to the realization of affairs, she sat up and stared blankly at Judy and Blake.

"Where on earth have you come from?—What time is it?" she demanded bewilderedly.

"Oh, Pam, you've given us such a fright!" exclaimed Judy reproachfully. "But I'm thankful that you're neither of you hurt, at all events." She turned to Blake. "Could you carry her across into our car, do you think? It would be better not to unwrap that rug she has round her, if possible."

"Much better not. It's enough to give her her death of cold, anyway, sleeping out here on a bitter damp night like this." There was infinite disapprobation of Sarton's methods in his stern accents.

The transference was effected in a few minutes and Judy and Pamela duly installed in the back seat of Blake's car. But, before he took his own place behind the wheel, Carrington turned again to Bay, who was standing in the roadway on the further side of the car, looking down at Pam with a faint half-smile on his lips.

"There's a cabin about a mile further on where some road-menders are camping," he said curtly. "I'll send two or three of them back to pull your car out. . . . And that's a damn sight more than you deserve!" he added in a low voice of intense anger.

Utterly tired out, Pam was almost asleep again already, her little cropped head resting against Judy's shoulder. Above her slender relaxed body the eyes of the two men met—met with a hostile shock, as rapiers clash. And suddenly into the dark, devil-may-care ones of Bay Sarton leaped a queer, puzzled look of recognition, mingling with the sheer defiance that had blazed out of them.

CHAPTER XIII

MIGHT IS RIGHT

THE immediate and prosaic result of Pamela's adventure in the mist was a bad cold in the head which kept her indoors for several days and gave point to the little admonitory lecture Judy thought it her duty to administer.

"You've got off very lightly indeed after running a risk like that," she wound up, making a brave attempt at severity. "You might quite easily have had pneumonia or something rather serious."

Pamela merely smiled disarmingly.

"But I didn't, you see," she objected. "And, really, I don't know how I even managed to catch a cold—all tucked up as I was in that wonderful fur lap-robe of Bay's."

Sarton had entirely repudiated the adoption of any more formal mode of address. "I'm going to call you Pam," he had announced, on the first occasion he came over to Rakehill to visit the invalid. "Our acquaintance really dates back to the days of our extreme youth, so that anything else would be absurd. Besides, I like the name Pam," he pursued imperturbably. "So I shall use it."

He was very regular in his visits while Pamela was tied to the house, generally turning up in the afternoon in time for tea, and she could not help contrasting his conduct with that of Blake Carrington, who equally sedulously kept away. He had not even troubled to make any inquiry as to how she was after her experience on the

night of the Cranruth dance, and she could only conclude that he no longer felt the slightest interest in her.

It left her face to face with a bitter deduction. That he had been attracted by her in the early days of their acquaintance she was sure. Her woman's sixth sense had told her that. She had felt it notwithstanding the brusqueness and apparent indifference of his manner towards her—and had even been conscious that he was making a determined effort to fight whatever attraction she had for him. But now it was being slowly but irresistibly borne in upon her that his disapproval of her—a disapproval which he had never taken any trouble to conceal—was so strong that it had gradually overwhelmed everything else.

Her spirit—that reckless, rebel spirit which was the inheritance her father had bequeathed her—flared up in hot resentment, and, womanlike, because she was hurt and angry with one man, she allowed herself to be far more kind to another than would otherwise have been the case.

So that Bay was permitted to come and go at Rakehill very much as he chose, sometimes accompanied by Judy, but more often alone, and as soon as Pamela's cold was a thing of the past, she went out with him almost daily, learning, under his gay and quite efficient tutelage, how to drive a car.

Her anxiety concerning the family finances had been temporarily allayed by the fact that business had called Abner Barstein suddenly away to Holland. He had departed thither, warning Bubbles that on his return he should expect an answer to the proposition he had put before him. But at least his absence conferred a breathing-space, as it were, and since Pamela's plan for saving Bubbles from marriage with Vera could not be put into force until Barstein came back, she dismissed the matter from her mind for the time being, and proceeded to take such amusement as life—and Bay Sarton—provided.

Both he and Judy were keen on hunting, and came out with the hounds whenever the Rakehill pack met within reasonable distance of Trethry, and on these occasions it was invariably Bay who gave Pamela a lead over the country, and who, after the day's sport was over, jogged home with her, side by side through the lanes.

More than one pair of eyes watched the proceedings with interest. To Judy it was frankly a matter of inward rejoicings that Bay showed himself so obviously attracted by Pamela. She adored them both, and she could imagine no more delightful happening, from her point of view, than that they should fall in love with each other.

She believed Pam quite heart-whole, and she was more than thankful to perceive that the influence of Yvonne de Brécourt, the Frenchwoman with whom Bay had flirted so outrageously on the voyage home from Singapore, was obviously waning. So that, far from discouraging the trend of events, she tactfully—as a woman can when she chooses—created little intimate opportunities for Bay and Pam to meet, and in every way endeavoured to play the part of benevolent *dea ex machina.*

The other pair of eyes which missed no move in the game was a pair of hurt dark ones—as dark as Sarton's own. To Lucian Gale it seemed as though that which he had always secretly dreaded had at last come to pass. It had been one thing to stand up against the fact that Pam had refused to marry him. He had become almost reconciled to the idea, and the daily meetings and good comradeship which existed between them had combined to partially obscure the full significance of her refusal. But with Bay's coming, the possibility that some other man might succeed where he had failed came home to him with a sharp-cut clarity that left him no illusions as to his own feelings in the matter.

Yet, since he was genuinely in love, the question of Pam's happiness occupied first place in his mind, and it

would have eased things for him if he could have felt absolutely sure that she was happy. But, although she smiled and laughed as often as ever, it seemed to him that there was a new look on her face. It had become a thought harder than it was wont to be and at times he could detect an odd, reckless note in her laughter. More than once he had tried to probe a little, to find out how matters stood, but Pam, who from her earliest schoolroom days had always made him her confident, had grown curiously elusive of late, and Loo felt that even the friendship she gave him was no longer the frank, free comradeship of former times.

As for Pamela herself, she went on playing with fire until an unexpected tongue of flame shot out and scorched her.

A sharp frost had set in, strengthening with every hour until at the end of a few days the ice was pronounced solid enough to bear for skating. Hunting had, of course, ceased with the coming of frost, and, as usual, the Waynes threw themselves heart and soul into any alternative sport that offered. There was no skating to be had at Rakehill itself, but at Trethry the lake's big sheet of frozen water provided a fine stretch of ice of which they were not slow to take advantage. And it was one afternoon, after a glorious couple of hours spent on the lake with Bay, that Pamela was suddenly made to realize whither she was drifting.

Toby and Bubbles had gone home early that afternoon, and for the last hour of daylight she and Bay had had the lake to themselves. Now, with the failing of the light, she skimmed to the bank and, sitting down, smilingly held out her feet for him to take off her skates.

Quickly disembarrassing himself of his own, he knelt down on the ice and proceeded to free first one slender foot and then the other from the gleaming blades. He seemed unwontedly long over the task, she thought, and when at length he had finished he tossed the skates aside, and instead of helping her up as usual, remained where he

was, on one knee, staring at her with an odd intentness. Even through the dusk she was conscious of the concentration of his gaze, and a sudden, unreasoning nervousness took possession of her.

"Bay——" she began falteringly.

But he seemed not to hear her. He bent forward, nearer and nearer until she could almost feel his breath upon her face.

"Pam," he said, a curious vibrating leap in his voice. "Pam, when will you marry me?"

She shrank back at the abrupt intensity of the question. Then, forcing a smile to her lips, she made a valiant attempt not to take it seriously.

"When will I—Bay, what nonsense you're talking!"

"I'm not. It's soberest sense. When will you?"

His voice held the same careless assurance which always made her feel a little afraid. She shrank still further away from him.

"Don't be ridiculous, Bay," she expostulated nervously.

"Then answer my question." The reply came swiftly; imperious as a command, whipping up her failing courage.

She sprang to her feet.

"I don't understand your even asking me such a question. There's never—I mean, we've never——"

"Don't pretend, Pam!" He was on his feet, too, and standing smiling down at her—that gay, challenging smile of his which seemed to defy the mere thought of opposition.

"I'm not pretending. Oh, Bay, let me go!"

She made a movement as though to leave him, but even as she turned away she felt his hand close round her wrist, vice-like in its arrogant strength. He was no longer smiling. His face wore a strange, tense look that made her catch her breath.

"Let you go!" he repeated hoarsely. "No, I shan't let you go—now or ever. Pam, are you trying to pretend

you didn't know I love you—want you as a man only ever wants one woman in this world——"

"Oh, no, *no!*" She struggled in his grasp. "Not that, Bay. Oh, please—not that——" And then somehow, as she struggled, her foot slipped on the frozen edge of the bank and she lost her balance and fell hopelessly forward.

In the same instant his arms closed round her—strong, possessive arms—and she felt his lips on hers, against her eye, her throat—crushed against them in hot, passionate kisses that seemed to drain her whole strength so that she had no longer any power to fight against him. At last he lifted his face from hers.

"Say you love me—tell me you love me, Pam!"

She could feel the tense, devouring gaze of his dark eyes. She thought it was like flame, scorching her as she lay, spent and helpless, in his arms. With the gesture of a child she put up her hand, shielding her face from that burning glance.

"I don't love you," she said at last desperately. "Bay, I never thought——"

His arms slackened their grip, and with the swift movement of a trapped wild thing she wrenched herself free from his clasp and stood away from him.

"'You never thought'!" he echoed. "Are you trying to make me believe that you never thought—never guessed why I came to Rakehill so often? I've surely been obvious enough"—with a short laugh. "Why, even that first night—at the *bal masqué*—I wanted you then. You must have known I cared!"

His voice was shaken with passion, and a sudden recognition that she was not altogether guiltless—a consciousness that in striving to forget her own pain she had recklessly gone here, there, and everywhere with him, without heeding the possible consequences—made her very gentle when she answered him.

"Bay, I'm sorry," she said. "I truly never thought. But

I can't marry you. Won't you—won't you please try to forget all this and let me go, now?"

"If I do, it won't make any difference in the long run. I'm not going to take 'no' for an answer. You're my woman—the woman I'm going to marry. And though you may say no now or for a year on end, the day will come when you'll say—yes."

Pam's momentary softening hardened once more into opposition.

"You're quite wrong," she said steadily. "I shall never, never say yes, Bay."

Something in her quiet utterance seemed to pierce through his arrogant armour.

"Why not?" he asked. "Pam"—swiftly, his eyes searching her face through the gathering dusk—"is there someone else?"

The question, with its lance-like penetration of the truth, struck her like a blow. She tried to speak and could not. Her lips moved voicelessly, and she turned her face aside from the relentless scrutiny of those dark eyes bent above her.

"So that's it!" He gave a short laugh. Then, shrewdly: "I suppose it's that black-looking devil who came tearing after us in his car the other night——"

"Bay, you're unbearable—you go too far!" The words broke from her in passionate protest. "You've no right——"

"Of course I've no right. But might is right in love as in other things. . . . And I like to know what I'm up against." His passion seemed to have spent itself, and he was once more the imperious, slightly mocking personage she had always known. And with the change in him her own poise came back to her.

"You'll be up against a very strong dislike on my part, if you behave as you are doing," she flung back sharply.

He threw up his head.

"No matter. A little aversion is quite a good thing to begin with. At least, we know where we stand, now, don't we?" he said affably. He stooped and collected the two pairs of skates which gleamed amidst the frost-white grass. "Shall I see you home now?"

She nodded, and together they set out across the fields, Bay chatting away as coolly and composedly as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Somehow that very nonchalance of his gave her a queer little feeling of panic. It was as though he were so sure of himself, so confident of his ultimate victory over her, that not even the flat refusal she had given him a bare quarter of an hour ago disturbed him in the slightest degree. Had she chanced to overhear his subsequent conversation with Judy, it would scarcely have served to allay her apprehensions.

It was Judy herself who broached the topic, approaching it from the sideline, so to speak, of Madame de Brécourt's present whereabouts.

"Yvonne? Oh, she's at her château near Le Geyt, of course," Sarton informed her casually.

"Bay—forgive me for asking—but is there anything—anything serious—between you and Madame de Brécourt?" Judy put her question a trifle diffidently. One could never be quite sure how Bay would take any inquiry into his private concerns. On this occasion he took it with a good-humoured mockery.

"I don't know the exact mileage across France," he said. "But it must be quite a good distance."

"Then—then——"

Bay smiled.

"Yvonne de Brécourt was merely an incident, dear Judy, if that's what you're tactfully trying to find out."

"Well, it was," she acknowledged, laughing. "Because, frankly, dear old thing, I was hoping you might lose your heart to my adorable Pam."

"Your hopes look like being fulfilled quite beyond your

deserts," he returned with mock gravity. "I made her the handsome offer of my hand and heart only this afternoon."

Judy flew at him and seized his arm.

"You've asked her to marry you, Bay?" she cried delightedly.

He nodded.

"I've asked her to marry me."

She drew a deep breath.

"Oh, my dear, I can't tell you how glad I am——" she began.

"And she refused me point-blank," added Bay imperturbably.

Her hand dropped from his arm. "She refused you?" she repeated, her face falling.

"Yes. Not that it makes the smallest difference. I'm going to marry her just the same. So don't worry."

Judy was silent for a moment. Then she said thoughtfully:

"I hope she doesn't care for anyone else. I've sometimes wondered whether she and Blake Carrington—— Only he's such a hermit one can't imagine him marrying anybody!"

"Can't you?" There was an odd gleam in Bay's dark eyes. "I can imagine him wanting to—pretty badly. By the way," he went on, "I suppose you don't know anything about the fellow, do you? His face seems familiar in some way, but I can't place it."

"No, I know nothing of him. He's very reserved about himself and his affairs. All I know is that he's a friend of David's."

"Of old Kelly's, is he? Oh, well, I expect it's just a chance likeness to somebody I've met that made me think I'd seen him before somewhere. He's a queer sort of devil," he added speculatively.

"I fancy he must have been through a pretty bad time

once," said Judy. "He—looks like it." And soon afterwards the conversation drifted into other channels.

But, although she said no more on the matter at the moment, Judy's thoughts reverted frequently during the evening to the subject of Pamela's refusal. Bay had a very distinct charm of his own for women, she knew, and if he had made up his mind to marry Pam, she thought it quite possible he might yet succeed. She devoutly hoped he would. Only one thing troubled her a little, and just as she was bidding him good night, the scarcely defined fear which had lain nagging at the back of her mind throughout the evening crystallized into words.

"Bay, do you think—are you sure that Yvonne de Brécourt regards—you—as 'merely an incident'?"

His eyes met hers squarely.

"If not"—he spoke very deliberately—"I'm afraid she'll have to acquire the idea."

CHAPTER XIV

A STRING OF PEARLS

THE road from Rakehill to Cranruth ran through the wide and fertile valley watered by the river Crane —a tiny river scarcely worthy of the name—which rose somewhere in the uplands beyond the town and thence meandered its leisurely way through the valley to the sea. It was a good, broad high road, and since Boodles, the pony she was driving, knew every yard of the way nearly as well as she did herself, Pamela allowed her thoughts to wander pretty much at will, only keeping an almost subconscious look-out for any motor-car that might chance to appear suddenly round a bend in the road without announcing its proximity by the usual warning hoot.

A somewhat difficult task lay ahead of her. Abner Barstein had returned from Holland, and it had now become imperative that she should put into execution her plan for rescuing Bubbles from the proposed marriage with Vera.

Round Pam's neck, warm and white against her skin, lay the talisman upon which she counted to achieve her object—a string of very beautiful pearls, the one and only thing of value possessed by her mother and which the latter had bequeathed to her. She knew they were valuable—worth at the least a thousand pounds, she thought, and although it was going to be a big wrench to part with them, still it was for Bubble's sake. And there was very little in this world that Pamela would not have done or sacrificed for the sake of that beloved younger brother of hers.

So that to-day, as Boodles trotted briskly along, her

destination was a big jeweller's shop in Cranruth, branch of a London firm, where she hoped to sell her pearl string for a sum which would cover, for at least some time to come, the money owing to Mr. Barstein. Inwardly she shrank from the sordid bargaining process which her plan must involve, the more so as she had really only a hazy idea as to the actual value of the necklace. She had not dared to consult anyone on the matter, since this would have necessitated going into family affairs which were better kept secret.

Not even to Toby or Bubbles had she mentioned her intention of selling her pearls. They would have hated the bare idea of her parting with them and vetoed the project at once, without stopping to consider the inevitable consequences if money to pay the interest upon Barstein's loan were not speedily forthcoming in one way or another. To have shared her plan with her brothers would have been merely to provoke a storm of argument, and Pamela felt she could not bear it. Parting with the pearls was bad enough in itself; to fight against Toby's and Bubble's inevitable warm-hearted protest against her making such a sacrifice would be more than she could endure. So she would have to bargain over the price with the close-fisted jeweller, single-handed, and without any actual knowledge as to what was a reasonable price to expect.

But there was one thing about which she had fully made up her mind, and that was, that when she handed over to Toby the money she had obtained by the sale of her necklace, she would try and induce him to pull things together—to run the Manor on more economical lines and see if it were not possible to get the whole property into better condition and make it pay. Latterly, she had begun to think it just conceivable that Toby might be persuaded into taking a new grip on things. Once or twice he had made comments upon the way in which Blake Carrington farmed Boscowen which had unmistakably sprung from a certain

reluctant admiration for the other man's methods, and perhaps, too, from some awakening inner shame of the way in which he himself mismanaged Rakehill. It was odd how Carrington, reserved and aloof as he was, had yet contrived to influence all of them by his judgment of things—to make his approval or disapproval something that mattered, shy away from the recognition of the fact though they might.

If only she could have consulted Blake, asked his advice as to how a fresh start could be made at the Manor, Pam thought there might have been a chance of success. But it was weeks since she had seen him to speak to alone. He seemed to have brought his talent for avoiding her up to the level of a fine art, and she felt that now, even if they chanced to meet, the wall of mutual reticence had risen to such a height between them that she could never bring herself to broach so intimate a topic.

Engrossed in her thoughts, she had unconsciously slackened the reins until they were lying loosely on the pony's neck. Nine times out of ten no harm would have resulted, since he was a surefooted little beast and rarely stumbled. But a loose pebble encountered on a descending slope may throw down the safest of horses, and Boodles, trotting gaily along a gradual descent, put one shining black hoof upon a small, smooth, insignificant round pebble lying loosely on the surface of the road. As it rolled from beneath his tread, he came down as though he had been shot.

Fortunately for Pamela, she had her own feet braced against the dash-board in front of her, so that although she was badly jolted, she was saved from being flung out into the road, and when Boodles had scrambled to his feet again, she jumped down to investigate the damage. To her first immense relief, she found that he had merely scratched his knees—a few light scratches which might be counted upon to heal and leave no scar. But as soon as she had seated herself in the trap once more and restarted the pony, she

discovered with dismay that he had lamed himself badly. Only a quarter of a mile still separated her from Cranruth, but it seemed a very long quarter, as, with Boodles limping painfully at every step, they covered the remaining distance at a funereal walking-pace.

Arrived at Cranruth, she drove straight to the King's Arms Hotel, where people who came into the town from the surrounding district habitually foregathered, and left Boodles in the care of the hostler there, with instructions to bathe his knees well and give him a feed. That it would be quite impossible to drive him the fifteen miles back to Rakehill, she was sure. He had probably strained a muscle in falling and would have to remain at the King's Arms until he recovered, while she herself hired a trap in which to make the return journey.

Meanwhile she set out on foot for the jeweller's. The shop was rather an imposing-looking edifice, situated in the High Street, and as Pam passed from the sunlight of the street into its thick-carpeted, electric-lit interior, she felt as though her heart had located itself somewhere in the toes of her boots.

It was with almost a gasp of relief she perceived that for the moment, at any rate, the shop was empty, and she proceeded to make her way to the furthermost end of the glass-topped counter, as far removed from the street-door as possible. A trifle breathlessly, and with little nervous halts between her words, she explained her errand to a rather supercilious individual who, as she unclasped the pearl string from round her throat and gave it into his hands for inspection, glanced at it cursorily, as though it were an object of surpassingly small interest.

"Pearls are right down in the market just at present, you know," he remarked, negligently dangling the necklace across a well-manicured forefinger. "If it had been emeralds, now——" He paused and regarded Pam as though the

fact that she was offering him pearls must be the result of conspicuous carelessness on her part.

"But they're not emeralds," she returned, flushing. "I have no emeralds."

"No?" He surveyed her with despondent eyes. "A pity. Pearls, you see—well, people are scared of them since they've heard about the artificially produced pearl. Very foolish, of course; but still, there it is." Here he deigned to contemplate the necklace more attentively. "'M—not bad pearls, fair colour and nicely matched. They'd be worth quite a good sum ordinarily. But, as I said, pearls are low in the market." As he finished speaking he laid the gleaming string down on the counter as though the matter were at an end.

Pamela felt her cheeks growing hotter and hotter beneath the disparaging tone of his remarks. It was hateful, humiliating, to have to submit to this patronizing belittlement of her most treasured possession by a man who, if she had come into the shop as a prospective buyer, would have been almost fulsomely subservient in his civility. Summoning up all her courage, she made another effort.

"Well, they're not emeralds, and they *are* pearls—real pearls, not artificially produced ones. What offer could you make me for them?" she said.

The man behind the counter picked the necklace up again and ran it through his fingers.

"Offer for them?" There was a note of gentle surprise in his voice, as though this was the first time such an idea had been mooted.

"Yes," she replied, with the bluntness of desperation. "I've told you. I want to sell them."

He remained silent a moment. Then he shook his head and relinquished the pearls once more with a tired gesture of finality.

I'm afraid, in the present state of the market, we couldn't make you any offer which you would consider satisfactory.

If I may advise you, I should postpone disposing of this string."

"But I must"—she corrected herself hastily—"I want to sell them now."

With an air of extreme boredom the man picked up the necklace once more and regarded it afresh.

"How much were you expecting for them?" he asked. "If you would tell me that, I could say at once whether we could give you anything approaching it."

By this time Pamela had begun to feel that this detestably superior person would look upon it in the light of a distinct favour if he condescended to buy her pearls at all.

"I thought—I thought," she faltered in a low voice, "that they would be worth about—a thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds?" he echoed. If she had mentioned the sun and moon as the price she hoped to obtain he could hardly have infused more hurt surprise and reproach into his tones. "A thousand pounds?" He smiled tolerantly. "If you had suggested something in the neighbourhood of four hundred, now . . . or"—with a sudden access of generosity—"say four-fifty—that centre pearl is really not a bad one, not bad at all—we might begin to discuss the matter."

"Oh!" Pamela's voice quivered in spite of herself. "I couldn't sell them for that! I'm sure they must be worth more than a few hundreds."

"Not to us——" She felt sure it was on the tip of his tongue to add the formula, "in the present state of the market," when he suddenly checked himself in order to bow ingratiatingly in the direction of someone who had just issued from the manager's office, benignly bowed out by the manager himself.

Involuntarily Pamela glanced round, and as she did so she felt the hot blood streaming into her face, staining it scarlet from brow to chin. Standing a few yards away, where he could not have avoided overhearing the last two

or three sentences which had passed between herself and the man with whom she had been talking, was Blake Carrington.

"Hullo, Tolman," he said, addressing the awe-inspiring personage behind the counter when he had shaken hands with Pamela. "You've got some good stuff offered you there, I see."

He quietly ignored Pam's hot cheeks and, from his manner, it might have been the most usual thing in the world to encounter one of your friends in a jeweller's shop, endeavouring to dispose of a valuable string of pearls.

The man's manner altered quickly from patronage to the deepest respect.

"Yes, sir. As I was telling the young lady, the pearls in themselves are all right—as far as they go. But, unfortunately, just now we have very little demand for pearls."

"There's always a demand for pearls of that quality," said Blake sharply. "May I look at them, Miss Wayne?"

She nodded voicelessly, and he picked up the necklace and examined it attentively.

"I suppose," he went on, giving her a friendly smile, "Tolman here is trying to beat you down in price?"

"Oh, no, sir, no, sir," intervened the man deprecatingly, colouring a little as he spoke. "I've made the lady a fair offer—very fair."

"He offered me four hundred and fifty pounds," submitted Pam. "I thought they were worth more than twice that."

A quick ejaculation escaped from Blake.

"Tolman, you villain, you deserve to be hanged, drawn, and quartered," he said. "You know the pearls are worth a damn sight more than that."

"Well, sir, they may be actually *worth* more. But not to us—not in the present state of the market." Pamela felt that if he used that phrase again she should either scream or burst into hysterical laughter.

"Well, I know someone to whom they would be worth very considerably more," returned Carrington. "And I'm a fair judge of pearls. If you've really decided to dispose of them, Miss Wayne——" He paused inquiringly.

"I've quite decided."

"Then I think I might get you something in the neighborhood of three thousand for them."

Pamela gasped at the magnitude of the sum. The face of the man behind the counter was momentarily expressive of extreme astonishment, and he opened his mouth as though to utter a protest. But before he could speak he encountered a significant glance from Carrington and the words were arrested on his lips, while the usual mask-like affability of the salesman replaced the blank amazement which had for an instant been written large across his features.

"It's all a question of supply and demand," he murmured deprecatingly. "If you, sir, know someone who is looking out for just such a string, of course you can command your price. With us, you see, we might have the necklace on our hands for a year or more. And that means a lot of money lying idle."

"Just so," replied Blake laconically. He turned to Pamela. "Are you in a hurry to get home?"

She shook her head.

"No, not particularly. Besides, I can't even make a start till I've hired a trap of some sort—or borrowed a pony," she added with a slight smile. "Boodles lamed himself badly coming in."

For a moment Blake made no answer. Then he said composedly:

"That's bad luck. But don't bother about hiring. Let me run you back in my car. And meanwhile, as you're not in any desperate hurry, will you lunch with me first at the King's Arms? Then we can discuss the matter of these pearls."

Pamela hesitated. His unexpectedly friendly attitude had aroused in her a curious mixture of feelings. She was conscious of a little aching thrill that was half pain, half pleasure, and beyond that, of a sense of unutterable gratitude at being relieved from any further need to discuss the question of price with the objectionable man in the shop.

"Thank you, I should like to come," she answered at last.

Half an hour later they were seated on each side of a small table near the window at the King's Arms, overlooking the busy High Street below, and disposing of the quite excellent lunch which that hospitable caravanserai provided. It was not until they had reached the coffee and cigarette stage of the proceedings that Blake reverted to the subject of the pearl necklace, and then somehow—Pam did not quite know how it happened—he contrived to draw from her, little by little, the whole story of the claim which Barstein had on the Manor property and of the bargain with Bubbles by which he proposed the debt should be liquidated.

"Well," said Blake, at last, "I feel sure I can get you at least three thousand for your pearls. "And"—he smiled encouragingly—"now that I know you want a few hundreds over to clear the interest, I shall put the price up a bit to my prospective buyer. They are beautiful pearls, you know—an unusually good colour."

Pamela looked at the necklace doubtfully as it lay on the table between them, glimmering like a rivulet of moonlight.

"I never imagined they could be worth as much as that," she said. "I expected to get about a thousand pounds for them."

Blake smiled.

"You don't know very much about pearls, do you?" he suggested.

"No, I don't. But surely"—her forehead wrinkling a little as the very natural idea presented itself to her—"surely Tolman would have offered me more than four-fifty for them if they are worth as much as you think? Why, they would have been a good bargain for him even at a thousand."

If Blake hesitated, his hesitation was of the briefest.

"Very likely he is loaded up with more pearls than he requires at the moment," he returned casually. "If he could have got them out of you for next to nothing—for four-fifty or some ridiculous price like that—he'd probably have taken them and chuckled over his bargain. But," he added wisely, "if you wanted a thousand pounds for them, you should have asked two."

"I should never have dared," said Pamela, laughing. "All I knew was that my father once said they ought to fetch a thousand or fifteen hundred."

"They'll fetch more than that," said Blake, pushing the string to and fro with a lean brown forefinger. As he leant forward, scrutinizing the pearls, a fugitive gleam of sunlight fell across his smooth dark head, carrying Pamela's thoughts irresistibly back to the occasion of her first meeting with him. She remembered his head bent just so above the bowl that held the water with which he was bathing her wounded arm and how she had inwardly likened his hair to black satin.

"The necklace was a wedding-present to my mother," she said, speaking hastily to check the memory that stabbed her. "A rich old aunt gave it to her—my great-aunt."

"She seems to have been a lady quite worth cultivating," commented Blake, smiling. "But I suppose she's no longer alive to bestow pearl strings galore upon her great-nieces?"

"Oh, she's still alive. I don't believe"—smiling back at him—"that Great-aunt Elspeth will ever die! I remember her quite well—one of those little thin, wiry old women with a nut-cracker nose and chin, and eyes like

gimlets. She quarrelled with my father years ago, because he wouldn't send Bubbles to the school she had chosen for him—Bubbles was always her favourite—and she's never had anything to do with any of us since."

"And so you took the whole of the family burden on your poor little shoulders and tried to cope with it single-handed?" said Blake. Those sword-keen blue eyes of his were wonderfully gentle as he spoke. "It was very plucky of you—Pam."

He paused for the fraction of a moment before using her name, and when he uttered it there was a curiously tender inflexion in his voice that made of the little name almost a caress. She flushed faintly beneath the quick, half-questioning glance he threw at her as he spoke.

"Yes, do call me Pam," she said, answering the unspoken question. "Everybody does," she added, trying to speak quite prosaically.

"I don't know that that's altogether a recommendation," he replied dryly.

For a moment the atmosphere seemed suddenly tense, charged with some repressed emotion. Then Blake continued quietly:

"Bubbles ought to feel very grateful to you for getting him out of such a scrape. He's been rather a young fool, you know, to be so friendly with Vera Barstein."

She nodded.

"Yes, I know. And I want to save him from the consequences. If he married her he'd pay—endlessly—for what was just boyish foolishness."

A strange expression crossed Blake's face.

"We all do that—pay endlessly," he said harshly.

The bitterness in his voice was so palpable that Pam felt her heart contract with a quick reflex pain. She knew—she felt that she had known from the beginning—that some deep-rooted unhappiness lay at the back of those sharp, sardonic speeches of his, and inwardly she longed

to comfort him. But he never let anyone get near enough to him for that. Deliberately, it seemed, he kept everybody at bay, shielding himself behind a grim indifference.

"Are you—paying for something?" Pam's eyes were very pitiful. Her whole being ached to comfort this man whom she felt that life must have hurt very bitterly at some time. "I often think you must be. You're so hard. So—so implacable."

"Yes. I'm paying. If I weren't——" He bit the words suddenly off into silence. But his voice had vibrated oddly and Pam felt her pulses quicken.

"If you weren't?" she said very low.

"If I weren't?" For a moment he stared at her from beneath bent brows, his eyes alight with a sudden new look that sent her heart racing wildly. Then he got up abruptly from the table.

"There are some debts one has to pay," he said. "Life's debts. So you see"—speaking with a lightness that was unmistakably forced—"it's no use my thinking of what might happen in other circumstances."

Pamela was conscious of that familiar feeling she had so often had with him before—as of a shutter suddenly dropped between them. No attempt of hers could ever raise it. She could only passively submit.

"I'll go round to the garage and fetch the car," he said, speaking in perfectly level, everyday tones. He had an amazing faculty for getting himself in hand again. It was as if the man's iron will could triumph over every emotion that shook him. "That is," he added interrogatively, "if you've no further shopping you want to do?"

She shook her head mutely. When he had gone she crossed the room and stood staring bleakly out of the window.

It had grown extraordinarily dark, she thought. The outward aspect of things seemed to have completely changed as though in harmony with her mood. The sky had turned

to a leaden grey, and here and there glinted a dull coppery glow, such as sometimes precedes a heavy thunderstorm in summer. The outline of the distant hills was already blurred by the slanting drive of heavy rain, while high up, almost directly above the town, it seemed, lay a dense, purple-black cloud.

Glancing up at that overhanging curtain of darkness, Pam shivered a little, conscious of a strange oppression in the atmosphere. For some inexplicable reason, a curious prescience of evil lay heavily upon her, threatening disaster, and she felt thankful when at length the car appeared, gliding smoothly round the corner of the hotel, with Blake at the wheel. Mechanically she turned and, descending the stairs, went out into the street.

"I'm afraid we're in for a wetting," said Carrington, as she took her place beside him. "It looks pretty black up above, doesn't it?"

The commonplace words seemed to snap the spell which held her, and her heart lightened as the car slid away. At least there remained this hour's run home with Blake beside her. That counted for something.

But the dark cloud, still spread its wings overhead, hanging motionless in the skies like some monstrous bird of prey.

CHAPTER XV

THE DESERTED MILL

IT all happened with a terrifying suddenness. One moment the car was humming evenly along the road which emerged from the town, while Blake and Pam laughingly discussed their chance of escaping the impending rain—"We'll probably drive right out of it"—afterwards she recalled with a flash of irony how cheerfully he had given this verdict only a bare instant before the catastrophe took place—the next, a flash of lightning ripped asunder the heavy cloud which had been lowering overhead. And with that tearing, rending fissure it seemed as though the whole waters of heaven were unleashed and emptied upon the earth beneath in a deluge of rain.

Within ten minutes the pretty little river Crane, ambling its placid way through the town beneath the bridge that spanned it, was transformed into a rushing, foaming flood. Horror-stricken, Pamela looked back and beheld the bridge carried away by what seemed to be the waters of a maddened, surging torrent roaring down the street through which they had passed only a few moments before, while at the same time, where the river ran through the valley almost parallel with the high road, it rose as though swept by an immense tidal wave—up, up, overleaping its banks and swirling across the road like an incoming tide, deepening with every moment.

Carrington, too, cast one swift, envisaging glance behind him. In an instant he realized what had happened, and the appalling danger which threatened them.

"Good God!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "It must be a cloudburst!"

"What do you mean? Blake"—in the bewildering horror of the moment Pamela used his name unconsciously —"Blake, what's happened? I don't understand."

"Sit tight," he replied briefly. "We'll have to race for it. Brender's Mill's our only chance."

As he spoke he bent low over the wheel and pressed his foot down on the accelerator. The car shot forward like a live thing, the water, which was already streaming inches deep across the road, spraying up like a miniature fountain from the wheels on either side.

As long as she lived Pam would never forget that wild ride for safety. The blank amazement with which the first beginnings of the flood had filled her suddenly crystallized into a sharp and clear-cut recognition that they were all at once in imminent peril of their lives.

The deluge of rain seemed to spout from the skies in a single enveloping sheet of water. In five minutes the roadway was flooded to a depth of two feet, and with every instant the water rose visibly higher, while from behind came the roar of the pursuing cataract, rushing headlong through the town to join the sea of water still rising over the road from the storm-racked valley, where, by this time, the narrow river had become a torrent.

In those few terrible moments it seemed to Pamela as though the car were fighting for its very life through a billowing ocean that deepened swiftly and implacably about them. And then, almost before the thought had formed itself in her mind, the water suddenly rose right over the bonnet and poured into the engine. The struggling car quivered and stopped dead, helpless as a foundered ship, while the deserted mill-house, flanked by its moss-grown wheel, which had been Carrington's objective, was yet a dozen yards away.

Pam turned a frightened face towards him. The dark-

ness, the driving, torrential rain—such rain as she had never witnessed—and the rapidly rising waters round them filled her with a sudden, overmastering terror. It had all happened so incredibly swiftly that she had had no time to get a grip on herself. They were caught like rats—rats in a well, doomed to inevitable, suffocating death.

"Don't be frightened!" said Blake quickly. "We shall be safe inside the mill in a few minutes."

"But we can't get there!" she cried desperately.

For answer he stepped down from the car into the flood which eddied round it and held out his arms.

"I'm going to carry you," he said.

The next moment he had gathered her up in his arms, holding her clear of the waters which were already eddying about his thighs. She could feel the rough wet tweed of his coat against her cheek.

"Shut your eyes," he ordered. "I'll keep you safe." He spoke as tranquilly as though no danger menaced them. Then, very steadily, he began to fight his way through the sea which lay betwixt them and safety.

And suddenly Pam no longer felt afraid. The arms which held her had all the pliant strength of tempered steel, and though Blake swayed as the swirling current of the waters pulled at him, still she felt no fear. She was sure—utterly sure—that he would not fail her. And even if he did—the thought flashed through her mind—even if he fell and the surging torrent submerged them both, death with him, with his arms around her, would have lost half its terrors.

Presently she lifted her lids, closed in obedience to his command, and stole a glance at him. His face was grim and set, but there was a queer, reckless light of triumph in his blue eyes, and she felt his arms strained round her, pressing her slender body against his own. A strange new ecstasy ran through her, thrilling her from head to foot.

It is no easy task to carry a woman, however light, and

at the same time withstand a rushing torrent of water. Slowly Carrington stumbled forward, half blinded by the beat of the rain, battling with his whole will, and weight, and strength of sinew against the surge of the current. His heart was labouring; Pam could feel it thudding beneath her cheek. Once, twice he staggered, the second time almost beaten to his knees. Her gaze fixed itself strainingly on the open doorway of the old mill-house. Would the man who bore her in his arms be able to hold out, burdened as he was, until he reached it? . . . She held her breath. Blake's face was ashen. He was rocking on his feet. . . . He would never do it. This, then, was death! There was to be no escape. She closed her eyes to shut out the vision of that beloved dark head sinking beneath the grey tide of the hungry waters. . . .

"You're all right!"

The words came to her vaguely through the momentary unconsciousness which had overtaken her. Followed the burning taste of raw spirit. Someone was holding a brandy-flask to her lips.

She stirred bewilderedly. So it had not been death, then, after all! Somehow Blake had won through against those awful grey waters.

She opened her eyes to find herself standing half-way up a narrow, wooden staircase, leaning against his shoulder. It was rather dark. In the dim light which filtered up from the open doorway below she could see him standing beside her, flask in hand. The staircase was worn and rotting with age, and the last few stairs were already completely submerged beneath the encroaching flood which lapped devouringly against them. Even as she stared, fascinated, yet another step disappeared from sight beneath that rapidly rising tide.

"Come." Blake tightened his arm round her shoulders. "There's about five feet of water by now in the lower story. But there's a loft up above."

They mounted the remaining stairs and emerged into an empty barn-like room, probably originally used for stacking corn in the days when the mill was in working order. The boards of the flooring were old, and, like those of the staircase, rotten in places, and the light came through a wide, wood-framed opening in the wall which looked on to the road and through which the sacks of corn must have been passed up from the wagons below for storage. At one time it had evidently had double doors, but now only one remained, swinging on rusty iron hooks. On the opposite side, nothing beyond a few splinters of wood, relics of the door which had once hung there, clung to the hinges. Just inside the broken doorway stood a wooden stanchion, plugged into the floor, a few surviving links of what had once been an iron chain still looped around it.

"Are we safe—really safe, Blake?" The words came gaspingly from Pam's lips.

"God knows!" he muttered. "Look there!"

He drew her towards the doorway and they stood looking down on a scene of incredible and utter desolation.

Down the road, like water rushing through a railway cutting, roared a muddy, yellowish-grey river, carrying with it to the sea tables and chairs, furniture of all kinds filched from the houses into the lower rooms of which the flood had poured, sweeping them bare of their contents. Branches of trees, and even whole trees wrenched up by the roots, floated by, swirled along on the current, the car, too, had disappeared, borne away by its momentarily increasing force.

Above, still lowered a thunderous black sky, while the ceaseless, blinding downpour of rain completely blotted out the surrounding landscape. It was appalling how the waters had increased in only a few short moments. The raging cataract, pouring out of the town like the waters of some mighty sluice set free, had overtaken the rapidly spreading flood which had risen from the valley, combining

with it to form a torrent two hundred yards or more in width, and now the old deserted mill stood like some lonely islet in the midst of a desolate sea.

"Thank God the mill-house is built of stone," said Blake. "If it'd been wood it would have gone in under this pressure. Even now——"

"Do you think it will give way?" asked Pamela.

He shook his head.

"I don't think so. They knew how to build in the old days. But do you see that?" He pointed to the floor. "There lies the danger."

In at the open doorway washed a little wavelet of water and trickled across the floor. She stared at it, horror-stricken. The flood had already risen level with the upper story! And it was still rising.

"But—but it can't rise as fast as that!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"It can. When a waterspout bursts the water sometimes rises at the rate of a foot in five minutes."

She glanced up at him swiftly. His hands hung clenched at his sides. His face wore the tormented look of a man who knows he is helpless—knows himself beaten by elemental powers that are stronger than any fight he can put up against them.

"Then—then we may be drowned?" she said slowly. She was trying to accustom her mind to the idea.

"Not if I can prevent it," he answered grimly. "There's not even a wooden table in this place, worse luck, or we might use it as a raft if we're washed out. We shall have to try and catch hold of something as it floats by. But, after all"—encouragingly—"things mayn't come to the worst. The flood may begin to subside before we're actually forced to quit."

Pamela looked down. The water washing into the room was lapping her instep now. Her eyes met Blake's in silence. There was no need for words.

"I know," he said. "But six inches is a long way off six feet."

Suddenly a drowned dog floated by, its little dead body supinely buffeted hither and thither by the current—an Irish terrier like Tatters. Pam uttered a cry and turned to Carrington instinctively. The pitiful tears were raining down her face. The next moment his arms were round her and he was holding her as though he would never let her go.

"Don't!—Darling, don't cry like that!" he exclaimed unsteadily.

"Blake—oh, Blake!" She clung to him, letting him hush her into silence. And presently she heard his voice again, deep and very tender.

"Beloved, I don't know if we're ever going to get out of this mess. I think—not. So will you tell me—it doesn't matter now to anyone—do you care? Could you have cared—as I do?"

"As you do?" she whispered. "Blake, are you sure? I thought—I thought you disapproved of me so frightfully that you didn't like me at all, now?"

Even with the water lapping round their ankles, with death perhaps only a quarter of an hour away, he gave a sudden boyish shout of laughter.

"Belovedest!—Oh, darling funny little belovedest! Did you really think anything so foolish as that?"

"I really did. And—and I was so miserable, Blake."

"You needn't have been. I think"—his voice deepened again to that grave, tender note which seemed to wrap her round like a caress—"I think I loved you the very first time I saw you—do you remember, when we quarrelled over whether Tatters was to be beaten for his sins or not? And I've loved you ever since. Whatever happens, if we die—and more than ever, if we live—remember that I love you with all there is to me, body, soul, and

spirit, through this world and through whatever comes hereafter."

"Blake"—it was hardly more than a whisper, tremulously compact of the passion and the tenderness and the sheer selfless adoration which is love—"Blake——"

With his arms about her and his lips crushed against hers, they forgot for a brief passionate and glorious space the grim figure of death, riding on the waters, inexorably drawing nearer. . . .

Blake stood with his back braced against the wall just inside the doorway, holding Pamela closely within the circle of his arm. The water was nearly to their knees now. They could feel the tug and pressure of it.

"Does it take long—to drown?" Pamela asked him, white-lipped. But her eyes were steady, steady and courageous.

His arm tightened round her.

"You're not going to drown if I can prevent it!" The words came doggedly between his teeth. He knew quite well what he meant to do. In a few minutes, if the flood still rose, he would take the only possible chance of escape. "Listen, dearest of all. "We're not going to stay here to be drowned like rats in a trap."

"But what else can we do?"

"Die fighting, anyway," he replied stoutly. "Pam, will you trust me—absolutely—and do just what I tell you?"

She lifted her eyes to his face.

"You know I will," she answered quietly.

"Very well, then. In a minute or two we're going to slip off into the water and drift till we fetch up against a log of wood, or a handy chair or table. There are plenty of 'em about," he added, smiling faintly as he surveyed the wreckage carried past them by the flood. "Now, can you hold on to me so that I have my arms free? I'll steer, and I think I can keep us both afloat for a goodish time—

I'm a pretty fair swimmer, thank heaven!—provided you can hold on. It's our only possible chance. But you'll have to grip like blazes and not bother about a single other thing except *holding on.* Leave the rest to me. Now, can you do it? Or will you lose your nerve suddenly and let go?"

Once again her upraised eyes answered with a passionate courage that matched his own.

"No," she said quietly. "I won't lose my nerve."

They were both silent after that. And in the next three minutes the water rose three inches.

"Now," said Blake coolly, when another few minutes had elapsed. "I think it's about time we were making a move."

With one hand he gripped the roughly-sawn wooden stanchion which stood just within the doorway, while with the other arm he still encircled Pamela. Together they moved forward, the water sucking against their thighs as they moved. For a moment they paused near the threshold, and, still holding her, Blake stooped his head. Their lips met in one long, straining kiss. In the hearts of each lay the knowledge that it might be their last embrace on earth. A moment later:

"Darling, are you ready?" he asked.

But Pam did not answer. Her eyes were riveted on the wooden post which formed part of the framework of the doorway. Suddenly she pointed to it incredulously.

"Blake!" There was a queer, uncertain leap in her voice. Her breath came quickly. "Blake—look there! The water's stopped rising!"

In a flash he had seen what she had seen—a couple of inches of damp wood showing above where the water now lapped the door-post. For a moment or two they both stood staring at it silently, hardly daring to believe their eyes—to credit the merciful truth of which it was a herald.

But, even as they watched, the length of gleaming wet

wood emerging from the water increased. It was true! The flood had begun to subside almost as quickly as it had risen, and inch after inch the waters sank so that within a short space of time the man and woman who had so recently faced almost certain death together were standing only ankle-deep in the rapidly ebbing water.

"We shall be able to sit on the edge of the doorway and dangle our feet over the road below soon," observed Blake cheerfully, going forward and peering down.

But the relief from the awful strain through which she had passed was too much for Pam. She tried to speak, to give him back a gay rejoinder. But her voice failed her.

"Blake—" She faltered abruptly into silence.

He swung round just in time to catch her in his arms as she keeled over in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XVI

BAY SARTON REMEMBERS

IT was about eleven o'clock in the morning, the day after the waterspout had burst over Cranruth, and Pamela and Lucian Gale were seated one on each side of a roaring fire.

"You must have nine lives, like a cat," he declared. "You don't look a penn'orth the worse for your soaking yesterday. If anything"—regarding her critically—"you look rather bucked."

She flushed a little. Did happiness write itself so legibly on your face, then?

"By rights, of course," continued Loo, "you ought to be laid low with rheumatic fever—or, at least, with a snuffly cold!—after standing in water for hours on end——"

"It wasn't quite as bad as that," she submitted. "Wet through, if you like, but we were only actually standing in water for a short time—and I expect excitement kept us warm!"

But it had been something more than excitement, as she very well knew, that had brought that glow to her heart. What does a woman reck of wet feet at the moment of sublime crisis in her life—when she learns for the first time the glorious fact that even as she loves, so is she loved in return? But this knowledge Pam still held guarded in the secrecy of her own heart. To-day—sometime to-day—Blake would surely come, and then—then they would make the whole world sharers in their happiness.

"The newspapers are crammed with accounts of the

cloudburst this morning," pursued Loo conversationally. "Have you seen them?"

"I think I know quite enough about that cloudburst without requiring any newspaper information on the subject," she said, dryly. "It—it was rather ghastly, Loo!" she added, with a quick, overwhelming recollection of yesterday's terror. "I thought the water would never stop rising."

"The papers say it rose to a height of fifteen feet. It did a frightful lot of damage. Lots of cottages were flooded right out and people drowned."

"I know"—sorrowfully. "If it hadn't been for—for Blake"—she hesitated the least little bit, caught by a sudden shyness in speaking of the man who now meant so much to her—"I don't know what I should have done. Just supposing I'd been driving home alone with Boodles—as I certainly should have been if he hadn't happened to lame himself."

"You wouldn't have had an earthly," agreed Loo.

"No. Blake was—wonderful!" she said rather low.

He looked at her with sudden intentness. Something—some vibrant quality in her voice, low though it was, as she uttered the name which held such a new significance for her, seemed to strike him.

"Pam?" he said. "Pam?" and in his eyes there was an unuttered interrogation.

For a moment she hesitated. And then—because Loo was her best pal in the world, and because, although he loved her, he had yet schooled himself to give her the friendship which was all she would take from him—she answered that unspoken question.

"Yes, Loo," she said quietly. "You've guessed right."

A flash of pain showed for an instant in his dark eyes, then was as quickly extinguished.

"It's Carrington, then!" he said slowly. "And I thought all the time it was Bay Sarton."

She shook her head.

"No. There's never been anyone—but Blake."

He got up abruptly and walked to the window, where he stood staring out across the sodden fields in silence, while Pam sat waiting till he should come back to her. She divined that he was fighting things out with himself—facing the inevitable, and her heart swelled with sympathy and regret. She was far too fond of him as a friend to bear unmoved the knowledge that he was suffering. At last he returned to her side.

"Tell me, Pam," he said quietly. "Are you happy—quite happy?"

"Utterly," she answered.

"Then that's all that matters. I—I shall get used to it after a bit." He held out his hand. "Good luck, old thing. And we're still pals—as we always were?"

She gave him both her hands and half instinctively lifted her face to his. He bent and kissed her—with no passion, but tenderly, almost protectingly, as a brother might.

"Pals—always," she said. Adding impulsively: "You've been a brick about it, Loo."

Soon afterwards he made some excuse to leave. Pluckily as he had taken the blow, he felt his grip on himself giving way. He wanted to be alone to get it back.

"And don't tell anyone—yet," said Pam, as they shook hands. "No one else knows at present, and I'd rather tell people myself."

He nodded understandingly, and a few minutes later she watched him from the window mount his horse and ride away.

He had barely disappeared out of sight round a bend in the drive when Bubbles came into the room, accompanied by Judy and Bay Sarton.

"More people to make tender inquiries," announced Bubbles, grinning.

"Oh, my dear, we only heard this morning, and of

course we motored over at once," exclaimed Judy, embracing Pam warmly. "What a frightful time you must have had!"

"It did seem pretty bad at the moment," admitted Pam, nodding. "But, anyway, it's all over now, and I'm really very pleased to find myself alive."

"The pleasure's quite mutual," Bubbles assured her. "With all her faults," he added, waving an explanatory hand to the other two, "she's all the sister we've got, so we'd really prefer to keep her in the family."

Judy made a feint at boxing his ears.

"Bubbles, you're a cold-blooded beast!" she remarked smilingly.

It is astonishing, after experiencing the shock of realization that someone we know has been terribly near death but has escaped, how easily jests and laughter come back to our lips. Perhaps it is wise old Nature's method of obliterating the horror that would otherwise score itself too deeply into our minds.

"How did you get away from the mill, finally?" inquired Bay.

"A rescue party came along with a cart and horse, as soon as the water had sunk down a bit, and took us off. Even then the road was under water to about a foot or more in depth. And as the cart had no springs," added Pamela feelingly, "it was rather a painful journey."

"But you didn't come back in a cart all the way from Cranruth?" demanded Judy, aghast.

"Oh, no. The cart took us to a farm where we were able to hire a dogcart, and we drove home in that."

Later on, when Pam's adventure had been discussed threadbare, Bubbles carried Judy off to inspect a new hunter which had just been added to the Rakehill stables. Bay remained behind and for a few minutes he and Pamela pursued a desultory conversation. Then, without preamble, he remarked suddenly:

"Poor old Carrington! If he weren't such a confirmed bachelor, I should think he'd quite expect you to marry him after taking so much trouble to save you from a watery grave."

"Would you?"—indifferently.

"I do—as you know," he cut in sharply. "Though I didn't have the trouble of nobly saving your life for the purpose."

Pamela forced a smile.

"I'm afraid you're doomed to disappointment, then. I've not the least intention in the world of marrying you."

Bay gave her a mocking bow.

"It's so rarely that we carry out our intentions in this world that I think that's quite a hopeful sign," he replied, completely unabashed.

"I don't know whether the point has struck you," she returned, stiffening a little, "but it seems to me that jokes of that description are in extremely bad taste."

"My dear child, I was never further from joking in my life. I told you the other day that I meant to marry you—and I've not changed."

"Nor have I," flashed back Pam impatiently. "And *I* told *you* the other day that I didn't mean to marry you."

Bay's eyes fastened curiously on her face.

"Perhaps, then, you intend to bestow your hand upon your heroic rescuer?" he demanded ironically.

Despite herself, beneath that cool, curious glance a deep flush mounted to her cheeks.

"How dare you——" she began hotly.

"So it is that!" He took a step towards her. "You may as well give up the idea, Pam. I swear no other man shall have you. I'd run away with you sooner."

There was the force of complete conviction in his assertion. Passion and a reckless self-will smouldered together in his dark eyes, and for a moment she felt an actual physical faintness stealing over her. It was as though

she knew that he must ultimately conquer her, fight against him as she might. The memory of yesterday—of the implacable waters rising slowly about her, inch by inch, foot by foot, came back. Just so, it seemed to her, Bay's fierce, unchecked desire was rising round her, hemming her in. Sooner or later it would overwhelm her—and all that signified happiness in life would go down before it. A strange sensation of foreboding filled her. Some subconscious knowledge seemed to warn her that the man beside her held her happiness between his two hands—and that one day, relentlessly, he would crush it.

"Do you understand me?" Bay was speaking again, and the dark eyes bent above her seemed to burn down on to her face. Involuntarily she stretched out her hands to ward him off, and then, to her unspeakable relief, the door opened to readmit Judy and Bubbles. She welcomed their return with a little inward gasp of relief, and, under cover of the general conversation which ensued, gradually recovered her poise. But even through the ordinary everyday kind of talk which was in progress she could still read in Bay's eyes an imperative, unquenched demand, still sense an undercurrent of battle—the clashing of his arrogant will against her own. So that she was very glad when at last the two visitors prepared to take their departure, and it was with a feeling of inward thankfulness that she accompanied them to the door and watched them drive off in Bay's two-seater.

"What a merciful escape Pam's had," said Judy, as the car swung through the gates into the road. "It's like a miracle."

"Yes," Bay nodded. "It was a pretty close call for both of them, I imagine."

"It might so easily have been the third tragedy," she went on, her voice a little shaken.

"The third tragedy?" He gave her a quick, sideways glance of interrogation. "What do you mean?"

"Why, there've been two in the family already—both Miles' and Harvards' lives were simply thrown away. And somehow, ever since, I've lived in dread of there being a third fatality of some kind. Things so often run in threes. Still, I suppose it's only superstition on my part," she added, as though trying to reassure herself.

"Of course it is. There have been plenty of men killed in the hunting-field. Miles' death, of course, was a different kind of thing entirely."

"By the way"—Judy spoke with sudden breathlessness—"you know, don't you, that neither Toby, nor Bubbles, nor Pam have the least idea that Miles didn't die a natural death?"

"No. I didn't know."

"Harvard wrote me the full story at the time, of course, but he decided that his children should never know it. He thought that if they knew the whole truth about poor Miles it would be such a ghastly shock to them—to Pam particularly, because she thought so much of him. I think it was very wise of Harvard."

Bay nodded.

"Very. But it's just as well you warned me. Good Lord! I might easily have blurted out something about it and given the whole show away."

The car sped on, and presently, as it approached Boscowen Farm, Judy discerned Blake Carrington leaning against the gate and signed to Bay to pull up the car. Evidently Carrington had just been working on the farm, for he was wearing a kind of holland overall which made his tall figure stand out, peculiarly light and distinct, against its background of black-stemmed firs. Above it, his dark, saturnine face wore a curiously set and strained expression, as though he were labouring under some mental stress.

As Bay brought the car to a standstill, a sudden, sharp

ejaculation escaped him. Judy turned towards him inquiringly.

"What have you done, Bay?"

"Nothing. Just stubbed my finger against something. That's all," he answered. And then, in obedience to Judy's signal, Blake came up to the car's side.

"We've just been to see Pam," volunteered Mrs. Sarton. "She seems wonderfully cheery after such an exhausting adventure. I don't think"—critically regarding his rather drawn-looking face—"that you seem to have survived it quite so well."

"I'm all right, thanks," replied Blake briefly.

"Oh, of course, a man would always say that! All the same, I should recommend a dose of ammoniated quinine," she said kindly.

"A thundering stiff whiskey-and-soda would be a long way more to the purpose, in my opinion," observed Bay laconically.

Judy laughed and shook her head at him, and, after chatting for a few minutes longer, declared that they must be making their way homeward.

"Good-bye," she said. Adding gaily, as the car slid away. "And don't forget that ammoniated quinine!"

Bay was very silent during the remainder of the run back to Trethry. Only as they drew up in front of the house he exclaimed suddenly, as though the recollection had just come clearly back to him:

"I remember now where I've seen that fellow before!"

"Blake, do you mean?" asked Judy, stepping out of the car and fondling the two big collies who had rushed up to greet her. "Where was it? In Singapore?"

Bay shook his head.

"No. It was the year I was over in England. I saw him then. But we never spoke to each other," he added rather grimly.

Judy, preoccupied with the dogs' uproarious welcome,

hardly heeded what he was saying. Nor did she ever think of the matter again until circumstances combined to bring it abruptly and very terribly back to her memory.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CLOSING DOOR

WHEN Judy and Bay had gone, the thought which had lain at the back of Pam's mind throughout the whole of the morning came uppermost. Where was Blake? Why had he not come to see her? Other friends had come, and many more had rung up on the telephone to inquire how she was after her narrow escape of the previous day—for the news that she had been caught by the flood had quickly percolated through the neighbourhood. Only Blake—Blake, who mattered more than anyone else—had not been near.

She wondered if he were ill—if the prolonged exposure to the cold and damp, following upon the exertion of carrying her through the flood, had taken sudden toll of his splendid strength, and wave after wave of apprehension swept over her. She longed to telephone to Boscowen to find out, but something held her back—not pride, but a queer sort of shyness. She felt that if his own anxiety were not sufficiently pronounced to induce him to come over, hot-foot, to Rakehill, she could not be the one to point this out to him by ringing him up.

Lunch-time came and went. Pamela ate scarcely anything, so that Bubbles, who always quickly noticed anything amiss in regard to her, commented on the fact with some concern.

"I say, old dear, are you feeling a bit played out after yesterday?" he inquired anxiously. "You're not eating enough to keep an average sparrow going."

With an effort, she contrived to laugh aside his inquiries, but when lunch was over she fled away to the old schoolroom, which she had converted into a sort of special den of her own, and sat there alone, hunched up by the fire, tormenting herself as to the reason of Blake's absence. And then, when this particular form of mental torture had been going on for nearly an hour, there came a knock at the door, and, in answer to Pamela's "Come in," Carrington himself entered the room.

"Toby told me I might find you here," he explained, as he closed the door behind him—closed it with a curious deliberation.

There was an odd note, too, of repression in his voice, and he paused a little apart from her, making no attempt to take her in his arms. She stood looking at him blankly, her nerves quivering with the abrupt arresting of the movement she had instinctively made towards him.

His face seemed to have altered. A certain haggardness hollowed the eyes and cheeks, as if sleep had not visited him throughout the night, and his mouth was compressed like that of a man exerting an intense control over himself.

For a minute silence held them both—a strange, impossible kind of silence, pregnant with some undefined emotion. At last:

"Blake?" she said hesitatingly. "Blake?"

As though her words broke the spell which had held him motionless, he took a single stride towards her and gathered her up into his arms.

"Dearest—dearest in all the world!"

There was passion in his voice, passion and something more—some deep note of pain which her ears, as sensitive to each inflexion as a violin to the touch of the bow across its strings, heard instantly. She drew back a little in his arms, leaning away from him so that she could see his face.

"Why do you speak like that?" she asked tremulously.

And then, suddenly—as her swift woman's intuition in some way linked that hard, dry note of anguish in his voice to his strange delay in coming to her—"Why didn't you come before, Blake? What kept you?"

"What kept me?" he repeated. Then he gave a short, bitter laugh. "The natural objection a man has to counting himself out, I suppose."

As he spoke, he withdrew his arms slowly, reluctantly, from around her. It seemed to her that she sensed in the movement more than the mere action of withdrawal. It was as though it contained a gesture of renunciation—as though he were deliberately setting her apart from him.

"Blake," she faltered. "I don't understand."

"No," he said. "You don't understand. . . . And I've got to make you."

"But what has happened to change things—since yesterday?"

"I think the principal thing that's happened is that we're not both dead," he answered cynically.

"That—why, that's just the wonderful thing," she said. "That we're alive—and together."

"No." The answer came hard as a blow. "No. We're alive—but we're as far apart as a man and woman can well be."

"Apart?—Apart?" She repeated the word vaguely. It seemed to her that he was talking arrant nonsense. A quick fear flashed over her. Was he on the verge of some illness, possibly—and feverish and light-headed because of it? It was well within the bounds of probability after the strain and exposure of the previous day.

As though he divined her thought, he shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'm not mad—nor even delirious."

"Then—then——" All at once her brain cleared. It became suddenly evident to her what he meant. He was repenting all that he had said yesterday. He didn't really care for her. He wanted to withdraw! The blood in her

veins seemed to turn to particles of ice. She felt cold—cold all over.

"I think I understand," she said, speaking in a curiously collected voice that surprised even herself. "You mean that—had you thought we were going to escape yesterday—you—you wouldn't have told me that you—cared?"

"Yes," he answered. "That's it. But"—swiftly—"not for the reason that you're thinking. What I told you then was the truth—that I'm your lover, now and always. Only—I'm not free to claim your love. Death—and yesterday I thought it would almost certainly be death—gave me the right to tell you that I loved you. But life has taken that right away again."

"I don't see how it can. Unless——Blake"—as a possible explanation flashed upon her—"Blake, are you—married—to some other woman?"

"Married! Good God, no! That's just it. I *can't* marry—you or anyone. I can't ask any woman to share my life."

She lifted her clear eyes to his face.

"Tell me why not," she said. She spoke very gently. In all that he said she could sense an infinite anguish behind it—a torture so keen that she almost forgot her own bewildered pain in seeking his.

A heavy silence followed. At last he spoke.

"Do you remember I once told you that I was cut off?"

She bent her head. "Yes, I remember," she said.

"Well, it's true. I'm cut off from all that means life to other men. And by my own act. Once I was guilty of something the consequences of which have ruined my life. And I can't offer a ruined life to the woman I love."

He turned away as though the matter were ended. But Pam was not going to let her happiness—and his, too—go so easily. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Can't you?" she said. "Don't you think the woman you love—and who loves you—has the right to a say in the

matter? You *have* offered it to me—your life—yesterday. And I took it. It's my life, now, Blake."

His mouth twisted with pain as the young, grave voice ceased speaking. But he did not yield an inch. Gently, but inflexibly, he removed her hand from his arm.

"You don't understand," he said. "By my own act I've made myself an outcast. And if you were my wife, you, too, would have to pay for the past just as I am doing. Nothing could alter that. Wherever I went the past would rise up and confront me."

"Tell me what you did," she said quietly.

For a moment he hesitated. Then, in dry, clear-cut accents which sent each syllable home to her with a deadly clearness, he told her.

"I took another man's life."

Every drop of colour drained itself away from her face. Out of the instinctive sense of recoil which overwhelmed her she clutched wildly at something that should at least justify what he had done.

"You mean—in the war? You had to!"

"No. I don't mean in the war."

"Then—then why? It was in self-defence, of course."

"I haven't even that excuse," he answered grimly.

"Then it was an accident?"

"Yes. In a way you may say it was an accident. I'm not a murderer. I had no intention of killing the man. It was an absolute miscalculation——"

She laid her hand swiftly across his lips. In her eyes glowed an infinite relief and solicitude.

"Don't tell me any more. I don't want to hear it. Oh, my dear! I'm so sorry—so *sorry* for you! It must be terrible to feel that, through you, however unintentionally, a man has died. But it need not ruin your whole life. No mistake need do that. We're not intended to spend our lives looking back on all the mistakes we've made. You've made one—and you've paid for it. But you're not

meant to go on paying for it for ever." She drew nearer to him. "Blake, don't send me away from you. Let me try to make up to you in the years to come for all you've had to pay in the past."

The sweetness, the utter selfless tenderness of her shook him to the depths of his being. He took her by the arms and stood gazing down at her with eyes so tortured that it hurt her almost physically to look at him.

"Pam—Pam! Don't tempt me!" he said unsteadily. "I'd give all I possess in this world and my hope of salvation in the next to be able to take you at your word!"

She leaned towards him, her soft, curving lips close beneath his own.

"Then take me, Blake," she said, very low. "And if—if there's anything more to pay, let me stand by and pay it with you. I'm not afraid of anything in life—with you. But I'm horribly afraid of life without you."

Almost violently he released her.

"No!" he said harshly. "No! You don't know what you're asking. I made a mistake—the worst mistake a man could make. And I must pay the penalty. But at least I'll pay it alone. The woman I love shan't share it. Beloved"—all at once his voice softened and he drew her into his arms, holding her closely. "Beloved, try to forgive me, because I've brought only pain into your life—I who would have thanked God on my knees if I might have been the one to bring you happiness."

For a few minutes they clung together in utter silence, their arms strained about each other. Vividly came back to her the remembrance of the last time he had so held her, as they waited for death in the loft of the deserted mill. Just in the same way, now, it seemed to her they were waiting for death and its agony, but this time it was a spiritual death, the death of happiness. For she had no longer any hope of altering Blake's decision. Something in his voice told her that it was irrevocable. He

could see nothing but that the black shadow from the past must stand between them eternally, and no effort of hers could make him regard it otherwise.

Presently he stooped his head and his lips met her own in a kiss that held both renunciation and farewell and, beyond that, the deep, hidden passion which only his iron will had forced into subjection.

"Henceforth it will be only friendship between us, Pam —if you feel that you can still give me that?"

He was asking the supreme sacrifice. For a moment she was silent, steadying herself. When at last she lifted her face to his, her eyes were very soft and shining and brave.

"Blake—my Blake," she said tenderly. "I think you're wrong—utterly wrong in this. But my friendship is yours just as my love is yours—as I am yours. Some day you may come to think differently, to believe, as I do, that no mistake demands a whole life in expiation. And if ever that day comes . . . I shall be waiting, Blake."

Was it an hour or only five minutes since the door had closed behind him? Absorbed in the bitterness of her thoughts, she seemed to have lost all count of time. Only the sound of that quiet, closing door still stayed in her mind—the bleak, relentless small noise of it.

She had been very brave, brave while the man she loved was with her to give him all he needed—that little all of friendship. But, now that he had gone, she was face to face with the bare, bewildering knowledge that the inexorable happenings of life had made shipwreck of her happiness. Those few brief hours of happiness which she had known since Blake had first told her that he cared only served to make the realization of the present more poignantly bitter. With one hand fate had given and with the other snatched away again.

There remained nothing but to face the fact with all the courage she possessed—to pick up the threads of life

again and try to make something worth while out of their tangled disarray. Slowly her hands clenched themselves as she fought back the anguish of remembrance which threatened to overwhelm her, fought it back with all the pluck that was in her. At least, from amidst the wreckage of her happiness still glowed the knowledge that the man she loved, loved her. And that must suffice her for the rest of her life. That—and friendship.

A log slipped suddenly and tumbled noisily out of the old-fashioned grate on to the hearth below, to lie there smouldering. The sharp sound of its falling recalled her abruptly to a sense of her surroundings.

Even when the flame of love has gone out in utter darkness, the usual daily round of life still goes on, with its insistent hourly demands, its big and little tasks. There is no shirking it, although your individual heaven happens to have crashed in ruins round you.

Slowly Pam stretched out her hand and replaced the fallen log on the fire. Then she tidied up the hearth, meticulously sweeping it clear of the litter of cinders and ash that lay there. The action seemed to her symbolical.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOOD LUCK AND OTHER THINGS

"GOOD Lord!" Bubbles' face was rather white, and the ejaculation which broke from him was in the nature of a gasp of amazement rather than an expression of piety. "Good Lord!" he repeated, and stared dazedly at the letter which he held in his hand.

Toby and Pamela, both occupied with their own share of the morning's mail, looked up at the fervency of this second exclamation.

"What's up?" demanded Toby jocularly. "You look about as thunder-struck as if someone had suddenly left you a fortune."

"Why—why——" stammered Bubbles, spasmodically flapping the letter he held, "that's just what *has* happened!"

His elder brother regarded him with kindly commiseration.

"Don't you believe it," he counselled. "That sort of thing isn't done—at least not in our family, worse luck!"

"But it's true!" insisted Bubbles. "Positively and actually true! It's old Great-aunt Elspeth. She's dead. And she's left me thirty thousand pounds."

"Thirty what?" exclaimed Pam incredulously.

"Thirty thousand fiddlesticks!" said Toby with extreme firmness. Somebody's pulling your leg, my son. Who's the letter from?"

Bubbles handed it across.

"It's all right—I really think," he answered, doubt and amazement contending for supremacy in his face.

Toby ran his eyes quickly down the sheet of notepaper, covered with precise lines of small, neat, legal-looking handwriting.

"I believe you're right, after all," he said. "The letter is from Armes and Agnew, the old lady's lawyers. And they offer to advance you any money you want. It *must* be right!" And then, as naturally and simply as though he saw no hardship in the fact that his younger brother would henceforth be a well-off and care-free young man whilst he himself remained still burdened with a heavily mortgaged property, he held out his hand. "Congratters, old man—packs of 'em!" he said heartily.

Bubbles shook hands, his expression somewhat solemn with the realization of the phenomenal good luck which had befallen him.

"Great Scott! It's rather a shock, isn't it?" he said.

"The kind of shock one can bear up against quite well, though," submitted Toby dryly.

"I call it perfectly gorgeous!" declared Pam. "Oh, Bubbles"—flinging her arms impulsively round his neck and hugging him—"I *am* so glad! It's almost too good to be true. We shall never get used to it."

Bubbles returned the hug with equal fervour.

"Oh, I expect we shall adapt ourselves to it without much difficulty," he replied, with a grin. Already the unreal feeling was beginning to wear off a little and the actuality of this delightful happening becoming credible. "By Jove, Toby! We shall be able to pay off old Barstein—capital as well as interest. And—and then," he added with boyish embarassment, "we might try to get Rakehill a bit more shipshape, mightn't we?"

Toby's eyes softened suddenly beneath their sandy lashes.

"It's jolly decent of you to suggest it, Bubbles, but I'm not going to forget that the money happens to be yours, not mine," he said quietly.

Bubbles flared in a moment.

"Oh, rot!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "We three have always stuck together through bad luck, and we're jolly well not going to come unstuck now the luck's turned. You'll pay off Barstein," he added, eyeing Toby firmly. "And then we'll put a bit of money into the old place and get it up to scratch again. *You'd* like that, Pam, wouldn't you?" he added, appealing to his sister for support.

And suddenly the recollection of how intensely she had wished it—so intensely that she had sold her pearls in order to further it—came back to her. In the excitement of the moment she had completely forgotten that she had given them to Blake to dispose of for her. Now the remembrance came back, accompanied by a feeling of blankness as she realized that the sacrifice of her necklace had proved quite unnecessary. She sat silent, staring at Bubbles with an expression of half-comic dismay.

"What's wrong?" he inquired curiously. "You don't look pleased."

"Of course I'm pleased," she replied. "But it's—oh, it's so *funny*!" And the irony of the situation striking her afresh, she went off into helpless laughter.

"It's evidently gone to her head—this sudden elevation to the ranks of the bloated plutocrat," commented Toby.

"It hasn't—it hasn't!" gasped Pamela. And then, stifling her laughter, she proceeded to tell them the whole story of her plan to repay the borrowed money and so save Bubbles from the proposed marriage with Vera Barstein.

Man-like, they said very little. Possibly they were afflicted by a certain inner shame that it should ever have been necessary for the woman of the family to come to the rescue. But Toby's quiet "Well played, Pam!" and Bubbles' "Oh, I say! You were a topping little sport!" lingered warmly in Pamela's heart for many a long day to come, as the spontaneous appreciation of those we love is apt to do.

Afterwards they returned to a practical consideration of the situation.

"If Carrington hasn't already sold the pearls, it's all right," said Toby. "But if he has, we must try and see if they can be bought back. Better ask him as soon as possible."

Pamela flushed scarlet.

"Oh, I couldn't! I couldn't ask him for them back again!" she exclaimed distressfully.

"You needn't. I'll see to that," replied Toby. "I'll ride over to Boscowen at once."

She made no answer. She felt that, in the circumstances, she would very much have preferred that nothing should be said to Blake about the pearls. It was so soon—so horribly soon after those sacred moments which had passed between them—to approach him on the subject of a sordid business matter. And yet there was no possible alternative. She realized that. She could not give Toby any valid reason why he should not do as he suggested without letting him into the sad and secret places of her heart. And that she would never do. She would at least turn a brave face to the world, however much life might hurt her. She wondered fugitively and with a curious sense of surprise how she could have laughed so heartily a few minutes ago. It was odd to find that you could still laugh, still see the whimsical side of things, when deep down inside you your heart felt dead.

So Toby rode off unhindered on his errand to Boscowen Farm, and found Carrington engaged in breaking in a young horse. He quitted his occupation when he caught sight of the visitor, and, handing the colt over into the charge of a groom, led the way into the house.

He listened gravely to Toby's recital of the events which had culminated in his visit, and offered hearty congratulations upon Bubbles' sudden accession to wealth. The pearls were not yet sold, he added. Pamela could have

them back at once. Toby's shrewd, light-blue eyes roved searchingly over the other's dark face as he produced the pearls from a safe and let them ripple through his fingers on to the table.

"By the way," said Toby, "those pearls are worth, at the outside, fifteen hundred pounds—probably not that. Do you mind telling me who had so much money to burn that they were ready to give three thousand for them?"

The suddenness of the question took Blake aback. He hesitated for a moment, unprepared with a reply.

"I thought so," remarked Toby cooly, picking up the pearls. "You were going to buy them yourself, weren't you, just to help us square off our debt?"

For a moment Carrington made no answer. Then, with a faint smile, he said:

"That's so."

"And are you so completely ignorant of the value of pearls that you were prepared to pay three thousand?"

"These had a special value," returned Blake, speaking as cooly as Toby himself. "They represented the price of Pam's happiness and peace of mind. I happened to know pretty much the amount of Barstein's hold over you."

Toby looked away, out of the window.

"And I suppose you think that Bubbles and I are a couple of rotters to have let things get into such a state?"

"No," said Blake quietly. "I don't think that. I know you're not." He laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "But I'm a good many years older than you—may I speak frankly, Toby?"

Toby's mouth was working. He nodded.

"Go on," he said in a rather muffled voice.

"You've been playing a mug's game—living beyond your income and letting Rakehill go to pieces meanwhile. Why do you do it?"

"Why? Oh, you'd never understand—a man who can

afford to chuck three thousand away on pearls that he knows aren't worth it! You don't know what it means to be hard up."

Blake smiled grimly.

"Don't I? I've known what it is to be almost on the rocks."

The other stared at him incredulously.

"It must have been some time ago, then," he remarked.

"Yes, it was some time ago," agreed Blake. "But it was actual fact then. Later on, when I inherited a biggish fortune from an uncle, the money was worth just that to me!" He snapped his fingers. "It came too late."

He spoke quietly, but there was a quality in his voice that brought conviction to Toby's soul. He realized that for some reason wealth meant nothing to this man, that it held only the dry, acrid taste of dust and ashes, the bitterness of what might have been.

A silence fell between them. At last Toby spoke again.

"I can't thank you properly," he said rather jerkily, "over those pearls. It'll have been a bit of a lesson to us. We're"—he paused, then brought his next words out with a rush—"we're going to try and put things straight at Rakehill."

"I'm glad," returned Blake simply. And presently, when Toby, the pearls safely bestowed in his pocket, had mounted his horse, preparatory to returning home, he said:

"Look here, Wayne. I've paid for my own experience in farming pretty dearly, and I've learnt a thing or two in the process. If I can be of any use to you in helping to pull things into shape over there"—he nodded in the direction of the Manor—"well, I'm not far away, am I?" he concluded with a smile.

Toby wrung his hand, and later on, recounting the main points of the interview to Bubbles, remarked tersely that he felt like kicking himself.

"I called him an unsportsmanlike swine, I remember,"

he added ruefully. "But, devil take it, the chap's the best sportsman of us all."

The news that the Waynes had unexpectedly "come into money" spread like wildfire through the district, and the congratulations that poured in from people in all ranks of life were genuinely warm-hearted. The popularity of the Wayne family, notwithstanding their many faults and failings, was astonishing, and no one grudged them their good fortune—except, possibly, Vera Barstein, whose subtly woven dreams of love and social advancement came tumbling to earth with the repayment of the money her father had advanced upon the Rakehill property.

Judy was blissfully happy over the matter.

"It's the nicest thing that could possibly have happened," she declared. "I only met your great-aunt once, and I thought she was a perfectly horrible old woman—which shows how mistaken you can be!" she added blithely. "Really, there's only one fly left in the ointment just now—in my particular pot of it, that is!"

"And what's that?" queried Pamela, smiling. Judy's enthusiastic good spirits were infectious.

"Why, that you won't agree to come to the South of France with us. Bay and I have just been offered a villa at Le Geyt for the rest of the season—Villa Mon Repos, and I can't make up my mind about taking it, because I do so hate leaving you behind. It would do you all the good in the world to come, Pam. You've not been looking really up to the mark since that awful time you had during the cloudburst."

A faint flush stained Pamela's cheeks. She remained silent for a few moments, staring sombrely into the fire's glowing heart. The strain of the last few days had worn her a trifle fine. It was not her experience on the day of the cloudburst that had told upon her—though she was thankful that Judy attributed it to that. It was the sleepless nights, the daily effort to appear just as usual when

all the time the bottom had fallen out of her world, that were fraying her nerves. There was a constant tension, too, involved in the hourly possibility of meeting Blake, and a weariness and heartache unspeakable on the days when she did not see him. The idea of going away, of leaving Trelyan for a time, presented itself to her in a new light. Apart from Blake, freed from the consciousness of his near presence, she might learn to readjust her outlook, find the necessary strength and courage to face life afresh on her return.

"I suppose it's no use trying to persuade you to come with us?"

Judy's voice broke through the current of her thoughts, asking the selfsame question which she had just been asking herself.

"Yes," she said, suddenly. "I'll come with you." Adding, on a slightly forced note which Judy, in her satisfaction over her decision, failed to notice: "I'd love to come."

So it was arranged that she and the two Sartons should take their departure for France as soon as the prosaic details of travelling could be arranged.

"Clothes?" Judy waved the suggestion airily aside. "We'll stop two days in town *en route,* and what you don't get there you can easily buy at Le Geyt. The most adorable Paris shops are open there all the season."

The next suggestion which emanated from her fertile brain was that Bubbles should be included in the party.

"There's heaps of room at the villa," she declared, guilefully reflecting that the visit to the Riviera might prove Bay's chance of winning Pamela and that a *partie carée* lent itself to much more subtle management than a trio.

Bubbles hesitated, torn between his new resolutions for the betterment of Rakehill and his desire to accept Mrs. Sarton's invitation, until at last Toby settled the matter for him.

"You go ahead," he said decisively. "You're putting up the money; I'll see to the necessary work. That's a fair division. And when you return you'll find all the improvements here in full blast."

So matters were finally settled on this basis, and the next few days seemed to fly past in a dizzy whirl of preparations for departure. Everything was accomplished at last, however, and on the final day of all, Lucian Gale, who had been spending a few days with some hunting friends in Somerset, came in, as he expressed it, "to say how d'you do and good-bye."

"This is a very sudden decision, isn't it, Pam?" he asked, as he sat firmly on the lid of an overfull trunk, which showed a marked indisposition to close, while Pamela wrestled with the lock. "You said nothing about it the last time I saw you."

There was a certain pointedness in his casually worded question, and Pam was conscious of the real interrogation which lay at the back of it.

"I—I want to get away," she said evasively. "I've never been to the South of France, you know."

"Is Carrington going?" demanded Loo.

She flushed scarlet.

"No," she said painfully. Then, with an effort, she added: "That's—all over, Loo."

"All over?" He sprang to his feet. "Do you mean that you've found—you *don't* care for him, after all?" There was a new light in his eyes—a light of almost incredulous hope.

"No—*no*!" The light died out. "It's only that—that we can't ever be married."

"Can't be married?" repeated Loo. A sudden note of sternness came into his voice. "Pam, what do you mean? Hasn't he been playing fair with you? If he hasn't"—his fists clenched—"he shall answer to me for it."

She smiled rather wanly.

"Ah, no, Loo! It's nothing of that kind, nothing in which you could either help or hinder. It's just—just life itself that has come between us." She moved closer to him and laid her hand on his arm. "Don't ask me anything more, Loo, dear. For there's nothing I can tell you. Blake and I are friends—but that's all we shall ever be."

Her voice trembled and she turned her head restlessly aside. Very gently Loo drew her into his arms and let her lean against his shoulder. There was no passion in his clasp, only a perfectly unselfish solicitude, the tenderness of one comrade to another who has been wounded. For a few moments they remained thus, her face hidden on his breast. But presently, with a little quivering sigh, she drew herself away from him and the old courageous light lit itself once more in her eyes.

"Don't worry over it, Loo," she said. "It's been a —a knock. But I'm not going to let it down me. When —when I come back from France, you'll find I'm still just the same old Pam."

But Loo, looking rather wistfully down at the white, plucky little face with its shadowed eyes, knew that she would never again be the "same old Pam"—never quite the same.

CHAPTER XIX

YVONNE DE BRECOURT

PAMELA was sitting alone in a sheltered corner of the balcony of Villa Mon Repos. The villa faced seaward, and in front of her lay the deeply blue Mediterranean, sparkling like live sapphire in the brilliant afternoon sunlight.

It was difficult to realize that this was the month of March—that bleak English month when the wind cuts like a knife and the angry dust swirls before it, while the clouds scud greyly across a leaden sky. Here, at Le Geyt, the skies were of an August blue, and in the villa garden a riot of summer flowers, roses and carnations, heliotrope and mimosa, flamed into a glory of vivid colour.

Pam knew that she would always associate the perfume of mimosa with her first coming to this sunny, southern coast of France. The trees were laden with soft, feathery clusters of the tiny yellow flower, and the warm scent of it filled the air. It had been the sweet breath of mimosa which had greeted her as she leaned from the window when the train swung round a bend and the whole beauty of dazzling sea and green-crowned cliff seemed suddenly to rush up to meet her eyes.

Then, very soon, she was driving through the little town of Le Geyt and along the road which skirted the sea to Villa Mon Repos. She would never forget that first glimpse of it all—the pink and white villas with their gay green shutters, the orange trees, globed with golden fruit, the tall, Eastern-looking palms, their long green fronds

swaying gently together with a soft, sibilant *shush, shush* as they grazed against each other. And now, in little more than a week, all this beauty of scent and colour and sunshine seemed to have become a perfectly natural part of her daily life, and Pam loved it.

Since her arrival she had had no time for brooding over the past. Judy had seen to that, whirling her from polo to tennis match, from a day's shopping in Nice to a motor-run towards the beautiful Estérel mountains, and filling in any spare time there might be with visits to the casino, where she either tried her luck at baccarat or danced to the music of one of the best bands in Europe.

To Pamela, dreaming on the villa balcony, it seemed as though an immense gap intervened betwixt the life she had led at Trelyan and her new life here at Le Geyt, and although there were moments when she longed unspeakably for the sight of Blake's grave, dark face, for the touch of his hand, yet in the main she was conscious of a sense of relief in her enforced separation from him. There had been too sharp a pain mingled with the joy of meeting him. At times it had seemed almost unbearable. She knew, of course, that when she returned from France she would have to meet him again, but by that time she would surely have schooled herself to endurance.

She thought, sometimes, that it would have been easier to bear if there had been some definite, unquestionable barrier between herself and Blake, such as the fact of his marriage to some other woman. It seemed to her so unnecessary that this intangible black shadow of the past should be allowed to block their road to happiness, and there were times when her whole spirit rose up in wild rebellion against his stern decision. She could realize the odium which might attach to a man who had, however unintentionally, taken another's life. One shrank instinctively from the taking of life. And she recognized that to a certain extent Blake would always have to pay for having

been guilty of such a deed. But it was unthinkable to her that he should consider—as he undoubtedly did—that the whole of his life was of necessity marred and spoilt by that one act. She would so gladly have shared with him whatever of obloquy and censure there might be to bear and helped him to build up a new life on the ruins of the old—to kindle a flame from the red embers which still remained. But he would not let her. Quietly and determinedly he had chosen to shut himself out from all that life might hold and live more or less the existence of a recluse, isolating himself from the world at large.

"A penny for your thoughts!"

Bay Sarton's voice broke abruptly across her musings as he stepped out from the adjoining room into the warm sunshine that bathed the balcony.

Pam lifted guarded eyes. Since they had come to Le Geyt, Bay had been nothing that was not friendly and companionable, playing tennis with her, dancing, and generally conducting himself as though there were no question of anything beyond good comradeship between them. But she did not trust him. He was not the type of man to abandon a set purpose so easily, and behind the gaiety and good-humor which sparkled in his eyes, it always seemed to her there smouldered something else—temporarily quiescent, but only so until some happening roused it into fresh life. He reminded her of a sleeping tiger.

"My thoughts aren't for sale." She countered his question with apparent gaiety. "They're much too valuable. What have you been doing with yourself? Having an afternoon siesta?"

His dark eyes laughed down at her.

"Guilty!" he acknowledged. "In fact, I believe the whole household has been similarly occupied. Judy retired to her room an hour ago, openly announcing her intention to slumber, and before I fell asleep over the racing news—which happens to be excessively dull to-day—I saw our

beloved Bubbles sprawling elegantly on a *chaise longue*. That's what comes of returning home in 'the wee sma' hours' from a gala night at the casino."

Pam nodded lazily.

"Yes, we were pretty late last night, weren't we?" she said. "What are we going to do to-day? Anything or nothing?"

"We're invited to 'tea' with Kelly at the casino."

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten. How nice!" Pamela had already met Judy's David Kelly and liked him—which was more than she had expected to do. Usually, she reflected, when you are enthusiastically told beforehand that you are sure to like certain people, you find yourself badly disappointed when you ultimately meet them. But David Kelly had proved an exception to the rule. The moment Pam had encountered his grey, whimsical eyes, set in the thin, rather worn-looking face, she had known that she had met a new friend.

Half an hour later found the party of four from Villa Mon Repos setting out on foot for the casino. The latter was built so that its beautifully tended gardens ran right down to the edge of the sea, its domed roof and walls gleaming whitely in the dazzling sunlight. Attached to it was the Restaurant des Rois, where, in the centre of a multitude of little white-clothed tables, a big square space was set apart for dancing. And it was here, at the foot of the thickly carpeted flight of shallow stairs which led into it, that David Kelly stood awaiting his guests.

He came forward eagerly to meet them—a thin, rather fragile-looking man who walked with a limp. Both the limp and that air of fragility, oddly incompatible with his tall, sinewy frame, were relics of the war, and one at least was a momento he would keep for the rest of his life.

Beside him stood a slender girl of seventeen or thereabouts, soft brown hair framing a flower-like face that

held all the delicate, fine prettiness of youth. When he had shaken hands with every one, David introduced her as his sister.

"Sheila has only recently shaken the dust of school from off her feet," he explained to Judy. "I don't know"—with a quizzical smile—"that the Riviera is precisely the wisest place in which to begin life immediately after leaving school?"

"Oh, I'm sure it is!" returned Mrs. Sarton, smiling warmly across at Sheila. "It's much better to meet the world for the first time as a glorified playground. It makes such a good impression on you—and first impressions are everything."

"They can at least be corrected later on," submitted Bay.

"I hope Sheila won't have to correct hers," retorted Judy.

"I should think it's very unlikely," said Sarton, bowing gaily. "I'm quite sure Miss Sheila is the sort of person for whom the world will be delighted to be a playground —always."

Bubbles, whose boyish blue eyes had been full of frank admiration for the girl's fresh English charm, scowled horribly, and before tea was half-way through he made an opportunity to ask her to dance with him. A few minutes later they were skimming over the floor together, looking exceedingly content with each other and the world in general. Bay followed suit with Pamela—in spite of the queer little feeling of apprehension which he always woke in her, she was fain to acknowledge his perfection as a dancer—so that Judy was left sitting alone with David Kelly, who, for obvious reasons, would never be able to ask anyone to dance with him again. His quiet grey eyes followed Pamela's slender figure as she fox-trotted across the dancing-space with Bay.

"You were quite right about your 'Pam,'" he said suddenly, as though he were answering something his com-

panion had just said. As a matter of fact, his thoughts had gone back to a letter she had written to him from Trethry. "You didn't exaggerate a bit. She's a darling."

"Yes, isn't she?" agreed Judy enthusiastically. "And actually, with the sort of upbringing she's had—or rather the lack of it—it's a wonder she hasn't been utterly ruined and spoilt."

David shook his head.

"You can't spoil gold," he said. "And life won't be able to spoil Pam—though it may hurt her," he added quickly. "She hasn't that sensitive mouth for nothing."

"Oh, I hope it won't!" exclaimed Judy. "I think she's only looking a bit strained just now because of a recent experience she has had." And she proceeded to relate the episode of the cloudburst—as far as she knew it.

He listened quietly, merely remarking as she concluded: "Rather a nasty adventure. I'm glad old Carrington was with her. I'd sooner have him with me in a tight corner than any man I know. Poor little Pam!" he added, a curious note in his voice, and then, as though some explanation were due, he went on quickly: "It must have jarred her pretty badly."

His glance still followed Pamela, and a new thought suddenly presented itself to Judy's mind.

"David—why, David," she said smilingly, yet with an odd little expression of incredulity in her eyes. "I believe you're losing your heart to my Pam. You mustn't, you know—because I want her for Bay."

A shadow fell across David's face. In his breast-pocket reposed a letter he had received only that morning—a letter written in Blake Carrington's strong, characteristic-looking handwriting—and a couple of lines from it leaped into distinctness before his mental vision: *"You'll have met Pam now, David, so you'll know what I've lost through*

one night's madness." And to that he could add two other brief lines, compact of bitterness, from an earlier letter written by the same hand: *"I've found her—the only woman that matters, Davie. We said good-bye yesterday. You're a lucky devil to have only a game leg as your handicap through life."*

Presently David's eyes came back to his companion's face and rested there.

"I shan't lose my heart to Pam," he said quietly. "You know the only kind of woman I ever want as my wife."

Judy flushed suddenly. It made her look surprisingly young. She shook her head at him.

"David, how old are you?" she asked.

"Quite old enough to be married," he replied with spirit.

"Of course you are," she agreed, smiling in spite of herself. "But not to—to——"

"Not to—to——" he repeated teasingly.

"Not to anyone old enough to be your mother."

"Aren't you exaggerating a trifle?" he inquired mildly. "I've never heard of anyone becoming a mother at the mature age of seven."

"Don't be silly! You know quite well what I mean, David."

"Of course I know! You're still industriously trying to prop up that rotten seven years' difference between our ages into a solid barricade against our marrying. I wonder when you'll get tired of doing it?"

"It's seven years on the wrong side," said Judy seriously. "If it were you who were seven years older than I am, I'd—I'd marry you to-morrow."

David bent forward, a whimsical light in his eyes.

"Would you, really?" he said. "Then let's pretend that it *is* like that. Or we might bring Couéism to bear on it. Every day and in every way I'm getting older than you are."

"But you aren't!" protested Judy, half laughing. "I be-

lieve you're getting younger every day, if anything. No, seriously, David," she went on, "we've talked this all out before in Singapore. It's no use going over it all again. Why, think of it—when you're forty, I shall be forty-seven, and when you're sixty, I shall be sixty-seven—going on for seventy!"

David leant back in his chair and regarded her with tranquil amusement.

"You do simple sums in arithmetic quite nicely," he said encouragingly. "Only they're such rotten, silly sums. It's a waste of undoubted mathematical ability. Hullo!"—he broke off suddenly. "There's a lady bearing down on us—a distinctly French lady."

Of the latter there was no question. Yvonne de Brécourt could never have been mistaken for other than a Frenchwoman. Each line of her provocatively feminine figure spoke to her nationality equally with every glance of her sex-conscious eyes—dark and brown and fringed with heavily darkened lashes, the upper ones starring upward like those of a child, conveying a fictitious impression of innocence, while those on the lower eyelids lay like tiny fans of shadow upon her cheeks.

"C'est Madame Sarton!" she exclaimed volubly, as she reached Judy's table. She held out both hands as though greeting her dearest friend and continued in fluent English: "But what a pleasure to meet you again! I had no idea that you were in Le Geyt."

"We have only been her a few days," responded Judy, shaking one of the extended hands in plain English fashion and endeavouring to infuse a modicum of cordiality into her voice. "Mr. Kelly—Madame de Brécourt. We met on board ship, returning from Singapore last autumn," she added explanatorily.

"And your brother? Is he with you?" queried Yvonne. She had summed up David in a single glance, and decided that he was entirely off the map as far as her attractions

were concerned. So, giving him a brief bow, she subsided gracefully—she could not move other than gracefully—into a chair and proceeded to concentrate upon Judy.

"My step-son, you mean?" returned the latter composedly. Madame de Brécourt interposed a charmingly deprecating gesture as if to indicate the absurdity of such a relationship, and Judy continued: "He's with me. Just now he's dancing with a friend of ours—across there."

Yvonne's dark eyes flashed in the direction indicated, and, having shrewdly envisaged Pamela's boyishly slender grace, she remarked commiseratingly:

"She looks ver' delicate, your friend. I suppose you have brought her here in search of health?"

"Not at all," returned Judy firmly. "We've all come out just to have a good time. No other reason."

As she spoke the band ceased abruptly and the dancers began to make their way back to their different tables. Bay and Pamela returned almost simultaneously with Bubbles and his partner, and Judy perforce made Madame de Brécourt known to those of the party who were strangers to her. The Frenchwoman gushed delicately at them, but for Bay she reserved a long, significant glance which seemed to hold all the memories of those nights at sea when they had so often paced the deck alone together—all the *tendresse* of unforgotten hours and the magic lure of moonlight.

Bay, however, who, in obedience to a gesture of her expressive hands, had seated himself beside her, remained obdurately cool and matter-of-fact and persisted in making the conversation general. Presently he became aware that Yvonne's long, slanting glance was going past him to rest with a kind of slumbrous warmth upon Bubbles' Greek-god young face, and when the next dance began he turned to him with quite unusual good-nature.

"Bubbles," he said, "you're our expert dancer. If

Madame de Brécourt is kind enough to give you a dance, you'll be a very lucky man."

Bubbles turned eagerly to the Frenchwoman. She was so exactly his opposite in type that it was almost a foregone conclusion that he should find her attractive.

"Will you, Madame?" he queried eagerly.

Yvonne rose at once. For a brief second her glance met Bay's, scathingly, ironically interrogative. She had grasped in an instant the fact that the man who had made light-hearted love to her on board ship a few short months ago was now in pursuit of a new star—the boyish-looking little English girl with whom he had just been dancing—and that, as far as she herself was concerned, he was politely endeavouring to shunt her. Whether it was worth her while to permit herself to be shunted or no she was not yet sure, but unquestionably this tall, blonde young Englishman was by no means without charm, and she turned towards Bubbles with a slow, sweet, seductive smile.

"Yes, let us dance," she said.

As they floated off together with that rhythmic perfection of step which only two good dancers can achieve, Bay's eyes followed them speculatively. Certainly he wanted to shunt Madame de Brécourt, and he could imagine no more facile method of accomplishing this than that of focusing her attention upon the youthful Bubbles. It seemed almost providential that the latter should have made one of the little house-party at Villa Mon Repos. Yvonne, neglected by the man for whom she had conceived a violent *penchant* on the voyage home from Singapore, would be rather like an untamed tiger, he surmised. But Yvonne, concentrating her attention upon a beautiful and impressionable Bubbles, would probably inconvenience him very little indeed, leaving him free to devote himself to Pamela.

"But he can dance, your young English friend! *C'est*

merveilleux!" remarked Madame de Brécourt, as they left the casino later on. Without any apparent manœuvering on her part, she had contrived to pair off with Bay as they all trooped out of the big doors together.

"Perhaps he dances better than I do?" suggested Sarton.

Yvonne sent a tiny sigh seaward.

"Ah, *mon ami*! We have not all the same gifts. But, if I remember rightly, you dance ver' well—ver' well indeed. But—you make love better!" Spoken in her soft, liquid voice with its pretty foreign accent and intonation, the speech lost all the effrontery of its baldness. It sounded merely sweetly sad and reminiscent.

"Making love is an art," replied Bay in detached tones. "Young Wayne would prove, I should think, quite teachable."

She gave a little low laugh.

"Perhaps he has had much practice! But I forget! When you make love in England your men mean always marriage. It is a serious affair. And for that there must be much money. It is not cheap—marriage! So I suspect this Monsieur Bubbles has not made love—ver' much. He is what you call a younger son, *n'est-ce-pas*?"

"Exactly. Only in this particular instance the younger son happens to have the cash. Bubbles has just inherited thirty thousand pounds."

A quick breath, drawn in sharply between red, pouted lips, was Madame de Brécourt's involuntary comment upon such surprising riches, and Bay suppressed a smile. Presently came the Frenchwoman's voice, lightly indifferent.

"But what a child of good fortune—this Monsieur Bubbles!" Then, as if the subject held no further interest for her, she passed on to another topic.

CHAPTER XX

CIRCE

"HAS Yv—has Madame de Brécourt been invited?" asked Bubbles. He was standing with his back to the room, gazing seaward.

It was a fortnight later, and the topic under discussion was a proposed motor-run and picnic in the direction of the Estérel mountains.

"No." Pamela shook her head. "There will be just ourselves and the Kellys."

Bubbles vouchsafed no comment, but continued to stare moodily out of the window, and Pam went on a little irritably:

"Surely you've seen enough of Madame de Brécourt recently? We don't want her always with us—like the poor!" she added, with a rather forced laugh.

"You may not. Personally, I think she's by far the most interesting person we've met since we came out here." And with that he turned away from the window and swung out of the room.

There was a distinct and most unwonted rasp in Bubbles' usually pleasant voice, and Pam's face clouded. From the day of their first meeting with Yvonne de Brécourt it seemed as if everything had altered—and not for the better. None of the women of the party cared for her. Judy, in fact, frankly detested her. "She's a man-hunter, my dear, pure and simple," she informed Pam, with a severity of judgment that was very unlike her normally

charitable attitude towards people. "She tried hard to catch Bay, and now she sees he's no longer interested in her, she's doing her level best to get hold of Bubbles." And Pam was fain to acknowledge the truth of Judy's shrewd summing-up of the situation.

Madame de Brécourt had opened her campaign by issuing a general invitation to the Kellys and the villa house-party to lunch with her at the small but rather wonderful old château where she lived—Château Fleuri—but since that first inaugural function it had been for Bubbles alone that further invitations had materialized. And now hardly a day passed without his either lunching or tea-ing or dining at the château.

In the intervals, the beautiful Frenchwoman—for not her greatest enemy could have denied Yvonne her beauty—always seemed to "happen" across the path of the little party of English friends. Either they met her on the Boulevard des Palmiers—the palm-bordered promenade which skirted the sea and where everybody strolled about and exchanged gossip and scandal during the sunshiny morning hours—or they encountered her at the tennis-club or at the casino *thé dansant* in the afternoon, or in the baccarat rooms at night. And each time, it seemed to Pam, Bubbles came away from these meetings a little more enthralled, a little more deeply steeped in boyish worship than before. The fact worried her considerably. If Bubbles' susceptible affections had been caught by Sheila Kelly, Pamela would have been delighted. The girl was charmingly unspoilt, and the attraction of youth to youth would have been but natural. But that Bubbles should be caught and enchained by a woman ten years his senior could only be regarded in the light of a catastrophe—the more especially as Pam had since heard vague, disquieting rumours concerning the lady of Château Fleuri. People were apt to lift their eyebrows or smile a trifle unpleasantly when her name was mentioned, and once Pam

had chanced to overhear a couple of Englishmen discussing her at the casino, and what she heard had not proved at all reassuring.

"Yvonne de Brécourt? My dear chap, leave her alone," counselled one, considerably the elder of the two. "She's too hot stuff for you to handle."

"She's a remarkably beautiful person," submitted his companion.

"Remarkably"—dryly. "And she's ruined more than one good man I could name. Penniless ineligibles are of no use to her. You can take my word for that. Moreover, she's got the temper of a fiend. See that?" As he spoke, he pushed back the sleeve of his coat, revealing a wrist seamed with a long white scar. "I got that in the process of extricating a boy I'm rather fond of from the fair Yvonne's toils a few years ago. During a somewhat heated interview she went for me, straight, with a beastly Eastern knife she happened to have hanging on the wall. Luckily for me, I threw up my arm just in time to deflect the blow. Otherwise, I might not be here to tell the tale. You keep off her, old son—right off her."

With a laugh, he let his coat-sleeve fall back into place, dismissing the matter lightly enough, but the little story she had overheard lingered in Pam's memory unpleasantly, and she thought about it more than ever when, on the day of the picnic, she watched Yvonne and Bubbles saunter away alone together, after lunch, and disappear round the curve of a hill. Somehow Madame De Brécourt had contrived to get herself invited for the occasion. She was abominably clever, reflected Pam, frowning a little, as mechanically she helped Judy to repack the picnic-basket, and invariably so gracious, so charming, that she made it almost impossible to behave at all distantly towards her, however much one might wish to do so.

"Come for a stroll, Pam?" queried David presently. "There's a point just round the corner where I'd like

to take you. You get the most gorgeous view of the whole coast from there."

Pam nodded, and, adjusting the buckle of the strap which secured the hamper, rose to her feet.

"I'd love to come," she said. And they sauntered off together, leaving the rest of the party to laze and smoke on the short dry grass which clothed the slope upon which they had picnicked. The two cars had been left standing in the roadway below, drawn to one side, and below that white road which outlined the coast lay stretched the wonderful dazzling blue of the Mediterranean, fringed with small towns and villages nestling in its bays, and broken by the sharp, craggy points of green-crowned promontories which jutted out like blades of gleaming jade thrusting through liquid sapphire.

Absorbed in the sheer glory of light and colour which lay before her, the look of annoyance gradually vanished from Pam's face. The tranquil beauty of the scene was like a cool hand laid upon her, stilling the nervous irritability which had set her pulses jerking unevenly.

"That's better," remarked David, regarding her with kindly, quizzical eyes. "Now that the worst is over, sit down and tell me all about it."

She smiled.

"All about what?" she said, seating herself obediently.

"The cause of that puckered brow I observed just now."

She flashed a quick glance of surprise at him. Unobtrusively, with a tenderness that took from it all power to hurt, David was the most keenly observant man she had ever met. Nothing seemed to escape those lazy, whimsical eyes of his.

"I'm worried," she admitted slowly. "David, I do think life gets horribly complicated sometimes."

He nodded sympathetically.

"Horribly," he agreed. "But what particular complication is worrying you just now? Can I help any?"

"I don't think so. You can't stop people wanting to marry other people who don't want to marry them—or shouldn't want to marry them, anyhow—can you?" she said, laughing rather ruefully.

David's eyes twinkled.

"You couldn't sort it out a little more, could you?" he suggested mildly.

"Well"—she jerked her head in the direction whither Bubbles and Yvonne had disappeared—"you can see what's happening. Anyone can. I—I simply can't *bear* Madame de Brécourt!" she added viciously.

"You're worried about Bubbles?"

"Yes, dreadfully. You see, I always feel that it's sort of up to me to look after him a bit. He's—he's such a kid! And women do make such a fuss over him. I've only just disentangled him, so to speak, from the toils of a horrible little Jewess person who wanted to marry him, and now here's that detestable Frenchwoman trying to do the same thing."

"She certainly seems rather to have lost her head about him," assented David. "But I shouldn't worry very much if I were you. After all, you're only here for a few weeks, and he'll forget all about her once you are back in England."

"Well, I hope he may," responded Pam doubtfully. There seemed a good deal of sound, sober sense in what he said, yet something within her, some sixth sense, bade her distrust the Frenchwoman.

"My dear"—David's eyes were very kind and understanding as he spoke—"love-affairs—both the true and the untrue—have a wonderful way of straightening themselves out. Even—yours—may do that one day."

"Mine?" The blood rushed into Pam's face and she turned a pair of startled eyes upon him.

He held out his hand.

"Am I trespassing?" he said gently. "But you see

you're both—you and Blake—dear friends of mine, so that I can't help wishing you'd let me meddle a bit." There was something so intrinsically tender and understanding in his voice that Pam was disarmed. Mentally, she threw down her shield—the shield she had been tenaciously holding betwixt her aching heart and the world. Somehow she didn't mind David's seeing how sorely she was hurt.

"Oh, David—David!" she exclaimed on a low note of passionate pain. "No amount of meddling can ever put things right for Blake and me."

"I'm not so sure," he answered. "Is it—forgive me, but he has never told me—is it that you can't overlook what happened in the past—that you can't forget that he once killed a man? If it's that"—slowly—"let me try and put the whole circumstances before you, and then perhaps——"

"There's no need!" she broke in, a little wildly. "I told him I didn't want to hear. All I know is that he took another man's life—accidentally, without intention—and that, because of it, he refuses to marry me."

"*He* refuses to marry *you*?" repeated David. "Then I've been on the wrong track altogether. I thought, naturally enough, that it was the other way round—that it was you who couldn't get over the idea of what he'd done. Lot's of women might shrink from it."

"No," she said. "No, I'd never do that. One doesn't—if one cares. Besides, I don't believe, I never shall believe, that we're meant to pay and pay and *pay* for what we've done that was wrong! You don't, either, do you?"

He shook his head.

"No," he answered quietly. "If I did, I'd lose my faith in God. I don't believe in an everlasting hell either in this world or the next. It would automatically mean the end of all progress. And life to me means just that—progress.

Tumbling down, if you like—we all do that—but always picking yourself up and scrambling on again."

He smiled across at her, his grey eyes curiously bright and luminous as he avowed his innermost belief. To Pamela there was something very simple and splendid and human about it, just as David himself, serenely making the best of shattered health and a life that was irretrievably handicapped, always struck her as simple and splendid and human.

"I wish you could make Blake think as you do," she said. Then, as though it might, perhaps, help to explain Carrington's attitude to life, she went on: "Was he—very much to blame over—over that death?"

"Yes, he was to blame," acknowledged David gravely. "There's no getting away from that. But there were excuses to be made for him. . . . Oh, good God, yes! There was excuse enough!" he added vehemently.

Pamela stared out unseeingly across the blue waters which stretched away to the horizon. Although her talk with David had brought no actual hope of better things in its train, yet somehow it had comforted her. It was an inexplicable help to feel that he knew and understood —that he, at least, didn't condemn Blake, whatever the rest of the world might do.

"David," she said at last. "You've been a dear. Once I felt that I couldn't bear *anyone* to know about it—about me, I mean. But now, I'm glad—glad you know."

"And I'm glad you've let me know," he returned simply. "It's the biggest gift you can make to a friend—to let him share your troubles."

As he finished speaking there came the sound of gay, rallying voices, and Sheila and Judy appeared over the brow of the hill.

"Come along, you people! We shall never get back to Le Geyt in time for dinner if you're going to sit and admire the view all afternoon," called out Judy smilingly.

"We've collected Bubbles and Madame de Brécourt, but we shall probably lose them again if we don't make a start very soon!"

"That so?" replied David, pulling himself up to his feet. "Then let's get a move on. We've quite finished discussing the affairs of the nation, haven't we, Pam?"

CHAPTER XXI

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

"OH, damn!"

The ejaculation left Bay's lips with a force and directness there was no mistaking. In his hand he held a telegram, the contents of which had evidently provoked the aforesaid swear-word. Judy and Pamela both looked up at him inquiringly.

"What's the matter?" asked the former, smiling. "You don't sound quite pleased!"

"Pleased? No, I should think I'm not pleased!" replied Sarton. He certainly did not look it. His black brows were drawn sombrely together over eyes that held a savage gleam like those of a suddenly caged animal. "This"—he crumpled the telegram in his hand as he spoke—"is from Carmichael. He's in London and wants to see me about the Blue Gum Tin Mine—and a few other things beside! He makes a point of my going back to town to meet him and consult with him."

Carmichael was partner in several of the mining concerns with which the Sartons were connected, and Judy realized at once that the summons probably related to a matter of urgency.

"Oh, Bay!" she exclaimed. "Does that mean that you'll have to go back to England—now?"

"Yes, confound it, it does!" He reflected a moment, then added: "No, there's no getting out of it. I shall have to go back to-day."

Judy closed the book which lay open on her knee and rose to her feet.

"In that case," she said practically, "I'd better see about your packing at once, while you find out if you can get a seat on the train."

"Oh, I'll get a seat on the train right enough—if it has to be in the guard's van!" returned Bay grimly, as he, too, rose and prepared to go off and make the necessary inquiries. "I don't suppose there'll be any such luck as getting a sleeping-berth. However"—he shrugged his shoulders. "The only thing I mind," he went on, turning to Pam when Judy had taken her departure, "is leaving you."

Pamela laughed.

"You'll find me here when you come back," she said. "I don't suppose you'll be away more than a few days, in any case."

"Quite a good deal can happen in a few days," replied Bay oracularly. "You might run off!"

"Who with, pray?"

"I don't know." There was a curious expression in his eyes as they rested upon her, as though some gloomy foreboding lurked in his mind. "It's possible I may be detained—I don't know what Carmichael wants. Anyway," he added, his dark eyes flashing suddenly over her face, "don't go off and get married to anyone while I'm away."

"I might," she replied teasingly. "One never knows one's luck, you know! Besides, as I've told you I'm not going to marry you, I really don't think my supposititious husband is any concern of yours."

"It *is* my concern," he returned shortly.

A kind of suppressed violence vibrated in his voice and Pam felt her heart quicken its beat. Bay's forcefulness, that quality of dominance which seemed to emanate from him, never failed to inspire her with a species of fear. As though he recognized the fact, a sudden gleam of sardonic amusement flickered in his eyes.

"Well, I've warned you," he said, speaking more lightly. "If ever you marry anyone else, a scandal will follow. Because I shall infallibly run away with you afterwards, whether you will or no. So that's that."

Despite the jesting nature of the speech, it dwelt in Pam's memory long after the train had borne Bay northward on the first stage of his journey back to England. Behind the gaily uttered words she sensed a menace—that arrogant assumption of a claim on her, of a hold upon her liberty, which by word and manner Bay seemed always able to convey. His compulsory absence was a relief, and when, three days later, news came that business matters might detain him in London for an indefinite time, she was conscious of an unwonted sense of freedom, of absence from strain, to which she had long been a stranger.

The sunshiny days glided along pleasantly enough. She and Judy, with David and his sister, made a very happy little quartette, and for the time being the fact of Bubbles' continued absorption in Yvonne de Brécourt was the only irritant. And then, all at once, out of a clear sky, arose unexpected trouble. David was taken suddenly ill with influenza, and before any thought of grave illness had presented itself to those who loved him, the French doctor in attendance had called Judy aside and informed her that pneumonia had developed. He was very excited and serious and self-important, and out of the voluble flow of words which eddied round her Judy grasped the salient fact that David was dangerously ill.

"Monsieur Kelly is not at all a strong man—not robust," explained the doctor. "It is doubtful if he has the force, the necessary power of resistance, to fight against the disease."

Within a few hours the whole tenor of existence had changed. Judy and a convent sister were installed in David's *appartement,* sharing the nursing between them, while Sheila was transferred to Mon Repos, where Pam

took charge of her and endeavored, by every means in her power, to keep up her spirits. The poor child had at first absolutely refused to leave the house where David lay, and it was not until they succeeded in convincing her that the only way in which she could really help was to lessen the work of the flat and ensure the utmost possible quiet for the patient by her absence, that she could be persuaded to go.

It was a very pale and shaken Sheila who finally accompanied Pamela back to Villa Mon Repos.

"Oh, Pam, do you think he'll get better?" she kept asking wistfully.

"My dear"—Pam laid a strong, comforting little hand over the girl's trembling ones as they twisted a pathetically moist handkerchief between their restless fingers. "My dear, if love and good nursing can keep David here, he will certainly get better. And he's so brave, so plucky always, that he's sure to put up a good fight."

Sheila nodded rather hopelessly.

"He's all I've got, you know," she said. "There are only just he and I—we too—and we've been separated the whole time he's been out in the Straits Settlements. I couldn't even see him during the holidays."

Pam kissed her. She could guess so well what kind of brother David must be—as good a brother as he was friend—and her heart ached for the little sister to whom he evidently meant everything. And day after day as they went up to Villa Violetta, where the doctors and nurses were fighting for David's life to inquire how he was, the reports grew ever more and more grave. There were times when he was delirious, and the day when the disease should reach its crisis loomed ahead like a black and terrible shadow.

The only bright spot for Pamela throughout all these dark days was the effect which the trouble that had

engulfed them all produced upon Bubbles. It seemed suddenly to have snapped the spell which bound him to Madame de Brécourt's chariot-wheels. He no longer haunted Château Fleuri, nor escorted Yvonne here, there, and everywhere, but remained at Villa Mon Repos, keeping up their spirits and helping them all by his cheery boyish presence. Never once would he allow that David might not recover.

"He pulled through that damnable war," he would say staunchly, "and he's going to pull through this. Don't you worry, Sheila girl."

He was wonderfully tender and protective towards Sheila, and she seemed to turn to him for comfort and support with an absolute certainty of finding it. He even managed to bring a smile to her wan little face, sometimes, and only he and she would ever know how many times in secret he allowed her to cry comfortably on his shoulder while he dabbed energetically at any visible portions of her tear-stained face with a big brotherly handkerchief.

Two or three small scented notes came for him from Yvonne and remained unanswered. Finally, hearing of David's illness from an outside source, she called at Mon Repos to inquire, and being by no means all bad—no one ever is!—she was genuinely shocked and sympathetic.

"But, *mon pauvre Bubbles,* if I had known that you were in such trouble, I would, of course, not have worried you with any letters. But I could not understand. I thought" —and her long lashes flew up appealingly—"I must have offended you and that you had deserted me?" Her voice quivered a little.

"Of course not," Bubbles assured her awkwardly. "It was only that there's been so much to think of——"

"Mais, naturellement. I understand. Now I will stay no longer. But if there is anything I can do—if I can help *any* way, you will call upon me, won't you? I am a

ver' good nurse, should Mrs. Sarton get overtired, you know."

The gentle voice ceased.

She held out her hands, and Bubbles, rather strained and overtired himself, caught them in his and kissed them fervently, touched to the quick.

"I know you none of you like her," he told Pam afterwards, rather defiantly. "But you misjudge her—every one misjudges her, really. She's—she's wonderful!"

Pam returned no answer. Only thinking of his spontaneous tenderness towards Sheila and of the girl's almost clinging trust and belief in him, she could not but ask herself how it would all end. Was Bubbles, whom she divined might very well find his happiness with Sheila, if left alone, going to be carried away by the undoubted witchery—and the equally undoubted experience—of the older woman, whom she recognized instinctively as one of the predatory, adventuress type? She hoped not. But Bubbles, with his singular charm and good looks, and the now quite respectable fortune of which he was possessed, was exactly the type who would appeal to Madame de Brécourt and whom she might be trusted not to allow to escape her very easily.

The crisis of David's illness came and went—and he was still alive. But that was the utmost that could be said. The doctors held out very little hope of his ultimate recovery. He was so weak that it seemed as though he might just drift out of this world into the next from sheer inability to retain his hold upon life. Nor did he appear to have any particular desire to live.

"That is the worst thing we have to contend against," one of the doctors told Judy. "He doesn't seem to care whether he lives or dies. If it is possible, Madame, I should send now for the English friend for whom he still keeps asking."

Judy nodded. Over and over again, during the time

when he was delirious, David had asked for Blake, and once she had suggested telegraphing to the latter to come out. But the doctors had assured her that if he came he could do no good; their patient would not even recognize him. But now that the delirium was past and David was lying limp and very white, but perfectly conscious, he had more than once murmured wistfully that he would like to see Blake. It was as though he had something on his mind which he wanted to confide to his friend.

"Send for him, Judy," counselled Bubbles. "It may just give David the fillip he needs. I can quite imagine old Blake peremptorily forbidding him to die—and he won't dare to disobey!"

But Pam said nothing. Only her eyes held a startled look—half pain, half incredulous joy—which Judy, her thoughts concentrated on David's welfare, failed to notice. An hour later the following telegram was speeding on its way to England: *"Carrington, Boscowen Farm, Trelyan, Cornwall. David dangerously ill. Come at once. Judy."*

CHAPTER XXII

THE RISK

"OH, Blake, thank God you've come!" Judy's voice quivered with the sudden and tremendous sense of relief which overwhelmed her.

She and Carrington were standing together in the little *salon* of David's flat, and as she looked up into his face she felt as though the heavy burden of anxiety which she had been carrying was all at once halved. There was something so strong in that dark face bent above her, so steadfast and indomitable in the blue eyes, that confidence and hope were all at once reborn. Something told her that David wouldn't die now—somehow Blake would pull him back from the mists of that borderland where he had been hovering so long.

"I'm glad I've come, too," said Carrington. "Why didn't you send for me before?"

"Because the doctors said it was useless while the delirium lasted—that he wouldn't have known you if you had come. It could have done no good."

"He might have died—without my seeing him again!" Blake spoke very low, his voice shaken by some deep, uncontrollable emotion.

It was like an accusation, and suddenly Judy realized how, engrossed in their own individual trouble and anxiety and with their thoughts concentrated solely on David, they had all of them forgotten the man in England who loved him and to whom his death would have come as the most

terrible and bitter blow. *"He's about the only real pal I have in the world."* She remembered Blake telling her that on the very first day they had met, and it rushed over her now how cruelly selfish and thoughtless of others grief and anxiety can make one.

"Oh, Blake!" she cried remorsefully. "Will you ever forgive me? I never thought—I was just wild with anxiety and—and——"

"And you've been nursing pretty well night and day and nearly worn yourself out," he supplemented, his quick glance taking in how much thinner she had grown and the dark shadows which lay beneath her eyes. "My dear, I should have done just the same, I expect, in your place. I should have thought of nothing and no one but David." He patted her shoulder reassuringly. "And now, suppose you take me to him? Is he expecting me?"

She nodded.

"Yes. We told him you were coming. I think it's just that which has kept him alive."

She led the way along a passage to David's room, and, opening the door, signed to the nun who was sitting beside the bed. Together the two women stole away, leaving the friends alone.

"David, old man?"

Few people would have recognized in those deep, ineffably tender tones Blake's usually harsh voice. At the sound of it David opened his eyes and the thin hand that had been lying supinely outside the coverlet moved with a weak gesture of welcome.

"Glad you got across in time," said a faint voice from the bed. "I've something rather special to say to you before I go out."

Blake's hand closed firmly over the frail one that had gestured the feeble welcome.

"You're not going out," he said with quiet conviction. "Not this time."

"Think not?" David spoke rather wearily. He was very tired; death seemed the promise of a long rest.

"Dead sure," responded Blake. "It'd be a thundering dirty trick to play on a pal, and I'm damn well not going to let you do it."

Into David's eyes came a pale ghost of their old whimsical humour.

"Same old autocrat as ever, I see," he said. "But I'm afraid you've miscalculated this time, friend Blake. I think I'm through with this world—and, oddly enough, I don't seem to mind very much."

"You blighter! Just take a look at it from someone else's point of view. Mine, for instance."

David nodded.

"I know. But when I've told you what I've been wanting to tell you, that won't matter so much." He smiled a little, as though at some secret thought. "I'll leave you something better to go on with than our friendship—good though that's been. And Judy will look after Sheila—poor kid!—I've asked her to. And Judy's 'looking after' is worth a long sight more than anything a fool man can do for a female child!"

"And who's going to look after Judy?" asked Blake incisively.

A faint colour rose in David's thin cheeks and he turned his head restlessly aside on the pillow. Blake repeated his question.

"Some luckier devil than I," answered Kelly at last, in a stifled voice.

"H'm! Well, I don't think she'll thank you for arranging matters so badly for her."

With an effort David pulled himself up in the bed a little, leaning on his elbow.

"Ah, you're wrong there. You don't understand. I—can't arrange—anything for her. She doesn't want me to."

"It's you who don't understand. She's half killed with anxiety about you——"

"No, no." David shook his head wearily. "I—don't count—really, in her life."

"If I'm not very much mistaken, you're the only man who does count—or ever will count with her. A woman doesn't go to skin and bone over a man who doesn't count."

"Has she grown so thin? Then it's with nursing me, Blake!" David spoke excitedly. "Persuade her to take a rest—to leave me and go away a bit."

Blake laughed.

"My dear old son, it would be about as useful my trying to persuade the Egyptian sphinx to get a move on."

David was silent for a time. At last he said:

"Let me look at you, Blake." And when Carrington bent over him he gazed searchingly up into the other's blue eyes as though he strove to read their innermost thoughts. "Listen," he went on. "She's turned me down—not once, but several times—because I'm younger than she is. *Now* do you understand?"

Carrington nodded.

"That may be. But when death and eternity come on the scene, they have a wonderful way of making a few years more or less seem of precious little importance. Now, old man, you're going to rest a bit. You've talked enough for an invalid."

Kelly assented. The momentary excitement of the last few moments had taken its toll of his fluctuating strength and he was looking very tired and pale.

"There's some stuff—over there——" he said, feebly pointing to one of the bottles on a table close at hand. "A pink label."

Swiftly Blake found the bottle and administered the necessary dose, watching with relief while a little colour stole back into the sick man's face.

"Now steady down a bit and go to sleep," he ordered, as he replaced the bottle.

"But I've not told you yet——" began David eagerly.

"You shall tell me later, when you've rested."

"You'll stay?"

"I'm going to stay in this flat till you are able to walk out of it," replied Blake succinctly.

A faint smile was David's only response. But there was something new in his face. The languor, the quiescent acceptance of impending death which is born of sheer physical weakness, had gone out of it. In his eyes glowed an awakened look.

"Domineering old beggar, aren't you?" he said softly. And a few minutes later he had fallen into the longest and most refreshing sleep he had had for days.

It was some hours later when Judy tiptoed into the room to see if he were awake. As she moved softly to and fro, straightening things, she caught his eyes fixed upon her speculatively. She smiled and came to the bedside.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked.

"I was thinking," he said quietly, "that if I clear out this journey you won't have to hurt your conscience by marrying me, after all."

Judy dropped suddenly to her knees and her hands went out and gathered his into their warm clasp.

"Oh, David, my David," she cried brokenly. "Only get well and I'll marry you the very next day. I've been a fool. But I'd marry you now if there were twice seven years between us!"

He held her hands very tightly.

"Do you mean that?" he demanded.

She nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Then I'll get well," said David simply.

The doctors were frankly astonished at the sudden improvement in their patient, and doubly delighted when they found that it was no mere brief spurt, engendered by the

arrival of the friend from England, but a steady and gradual regaining of strength. But it was two or three days before David was allowed to talk much again, and in the meantime the secret thing of which he wished to unburden himself to Blake had perforce to remain unuttered. Once he asked him if he had seen Pam.

"No," replied Blake curtly. "I came here to see you out of the wood, and until I'm through with that I don't want to see anyone else."

It had been easy enough for him to avoid meeting her. Pamela, tremulously self-conscious at the knowledge of Blake's near vicinity, kept studiously away from Villa Violetta, always sending Bubbles and Sheila to inquire after the patient, and when Blake resigned his post in the sick-room in order to get an hour's fresh air, he invariably chose a time and betook himself in a direction when and where he was least likely to encounter Pamela.

By the end of the third day the doctors were able to pronounce David out of all danger. "He only needed an incentive to live," one of them told Judy, "and his friend from England seems able to have supplied it." Judy flushed a little as she returned some suitable reply, but she did not explain what particular incentive Blake had provided. Perhaps, though, being a Frenchman, with all the instinct of his countrymen for a romance, the doctor had divined it for himself, for he went away smiling and rubbing his hands together and confided to his *confrère* that Madame Sarton had much charm and would be a very pretty woman when once the thinness produced by constant nursing and anxiety was a thing of the past.

"I think I'm sufficiently recovered now for you to cease concentrating entirely on me," observed David one morning, as Blake stood by his bedside looking down at him with an expression of complete satisfaction.

"What do you mean?" demanded Blake.

"Well—for politeness' sake—you might go and call at Villa Mon Repos, for instance," suggested David.

"I can't!" The answer came clipped and curt. "When I'm sure you're safe—and I think you're pretty nearly that, now—I'm going straight back to England."

"Without seeing Pam?"

Blake nodded.

"Yes. It's better like that. Don't probe too much, old man. I—I've discovered I'm not quite so strong as I thought I was, and I've decided to sell Boscowen and get out of Cornwall before she returns. I can't stick constantly meeting her without wanting to marry her."

"About the best thing you could do," commented David serenely. "To marry her, I mean."

"For her or for me?" asked Blake scathingly.

"For both of you."

"Rot, my dear David. One doesn't ask a woman—a woman like Pam"—his voice deepened suddenly—"to link her life with that of a murderer." He flung the word out savagely, almost as though it were an actual missile, but David met it unblenching.

"Don't use words with such careless indifference as to their meaning," he objected placidly. "You're no more a murderer than I am."

"That was what Macpherson called it—murder," replied Blake doggedly. "And he was right. Don't you see it, man?" he went on, the mental agony and strain he had endured for years past vibrating in his voice. "If I'd kept my head and not played the fool because a woman who wasn't worth the tip of Pam's little finger chose to give me the chuck, that boy—whoever he was—would be alive to-day."

"All of which may be perfectly true. But it doesn't make you a murderer. There is many a death that lies at the door of someone's carelessness or foolishness—but we don't call it murder. You might have passed a dozen nights like

the one you spent in Edinburgh that time, and no one would have died in consequence. It was just ill-luck and an unfortunate combination of events which brought about that result in your particular case."

"No, David." Blake spoke with a quiet, implacable gravity. "It was not 'just ill-luck.' I was on duty—exactly as much as a soldier is on duty—liable to be called upon for service at any moment. And I'd no right to unfit myself for that service should it be required. . . . Oh, I've had time enough in the last five years to see it all in its right perspective!"

"Then go back to the beginning—to the first link of the chain, said David. "If you trace it back from cause to effect, Claire Neville is responsible for that lad's death."

Blake shook his head with a half-smile.

"No, I can't shift the responsibility that way, old chap. Her sin was hers, and probably she's paid for it in one way or another since. We mostly do. But I've got to stand the bill for my own misdoing."

"Very well. I'll grant you that, if you like," conceded David. "You've paid—and to a certain extent you'll always pay. No one could ever forget a thing like that; it'll hurt you all your life. But there's no need to deliberately double that payment *and make Pam pay, too.*"

"Pam?"

"Yes. You don't seem to me to have thought of her in the matter at all."

"I've thought of nothing else!" groaned Blake.

"Then you've been thinking upside-down—looking at the whole thing through a distorting-glass. Take your own punishment, but don't deliberately push your burden on to the shoulders of the woman you love and who loves you. . . . *And who loves you*—that's the crux of the whole matter, Blake. Because she loves you—loves you as only a woman like Pam can love—you're cutting out her whole happiness in life, making her pay, day in, day

out, through all the years she may live, for what *you* did. What right have you to make her pay like that? Spiritually, it's taking another life—as much as, physically, you took that boy's life. Have you ever thought of it like that?"

He ceased and, lying back on his pillows, regarded the other man with eager, anxious eyes. It was difficult to guess how much or how little impression he had created. Blake sat very still, his hands hanging clasped between his knees, his head bent, and for what seemed to David an interminable length of time no sound broke the silence of the room. At last:

"No," said Carrington slowly. "I hadn't thought of it like that."

"Then, for God's sake, do, man! Isn't Pam willing to marry you?"

"Pam?" For a moment, Blake's dark, anguished face lightened. "Yes, she is. That's her pluck. She's ready to face anything, but she doesn't realize what she might have to face."

"What might she have to face—more than a certain amount of censure of her husband from the narrow-minded people, the block-headed people, of the world? Any woman worth her salt will face that. It's not much of a price to pay for happiness."

Blake rose and paced the room backwards and forwards silently for a minute or two. Then he came to a halt beside David's bed.

"There's one thing you haven't thought of," he said slowly. "It's the thing that has haunted me all these years. I don't know—I never have known—the name of the man on whom I operated. At any time I may come across some stranger, man or woman, and discover that the boy who died under my hands was their dearest belonging. I put the right of happiness out for someone, you know, when I bungled—and one day I may meet that someone. "Or"—

his gaze seemed to grip David's and hold it—"my wife might be the one to make the discovery. Can you imagine what that would mean to her—how it would bring home to her the fact that on her husband's shoulders lay the blame for a man's death and all that it must have meant to those who loved him?"

David made no answer for a moment. Then he said:

"Put that up to Pam just as you have put it up to me. I don't think"—with a quiet, grave smile—"that you'll find she'll flinch even from that. And if she doesn't—then you can't. Be man enough to accept that risk and all it entails—and give her her happiness."

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE VILLA GARDEN

PAMELA stood with her arms resting rather wearily on the garden wall, gazing out over the sea. The air was heavy with the mingled perfume of flowers, while behind her rose the tall, curved fronds of a group of palms, their thick brown trunks, screening her from sight of the villa windows, seeming to enclose her in a little space of scented silence.

It was nearly a week now since Blake had come out from England, and never once, during the whole of that time, had he made any attempt to see her. She could not understand it. He had asked her at least to give him her friendship, and if this was his idea of friendship it was something utterly different from her own. A certain diffidence had kept her from asking him to Villa Mon Repos immediately upon his arrival in Le Geyt, and added to this had been the anxiety they were all feeling concerning David. But when once David was pronounced out of danger, she had never doubted that Blake would come to see her. Since he had not chosen to do so, she felt illimitably thankful that she had refrained from asking him.

Nevertheless, although she was thankful that she had not put herself in the invidious position of inviting a man to come and see her who, apparently, had no slightest wish to do so, she was hurt to the core of her—puzzled and hurt—

and now, alone in this silent corner of the garden, slow, burning tears brimmed to her eyes and hung there.

"Pam!"

So absorbed had she been in her thoughts that she had heard neither the click of the gate nor the sound of footsteps crossing the velvety lawn, and now, without warning, the deep, quiet voice which meant more to her than any other voice in the world sounded in her ears.

"Pam!"

She whirled round, brushing the tears from her eyes with a hasty hand as she turned, to find Carrington standing only a few feet away from her. For the moment she could not speak. Every drop of blood seemed to drain itself away from her heart. Then all at once the tall trunks of the trees and the white and red and amethyst of the flowers, and the figure of Blake himself, grew vague and indistinct, jumbled together into an indefinite blur. She swayed slightly, clutching instinctively at the wall behind her for support. The next moment she felt Blake's arms round her, supporting her, holding her, and she turned to him as a tired child may turn its face towards some beloved breast. For a little space they remained thus, conscious only of the utter happiness of being together again, of the touch and nearness of each other.

At last she lifted her head from his shoulder.

"Why didn't you come? Why didn't you come before?" she murmured brokenly.

He drew her towards a bench beneath one of the palms, and they sat down, his arms still about her.

"I didn't come because I was afraid," he answered. "I—daren't trust myself. Pam, I asked you for your friendship." He paused, and she nodded voicelessly. "Afterwards, I realized that friendship is the last thing on earth I could take from you. And since it seemed to me, then, that anything else—more—was forbidden me, I made up my mind not to see you again. I intended to have quitted Trelyan before your return——"

"To have left Trelyan?" The question broke from her lips like a cry.

"Yes. Then came David's illness and the telegram which brought me here—so near you. And I swore I would keep away—not see you while I was here."

"You didn't—want—to see me?"

"I wanted it more than anything on earth." His voice was unsteady, shaken with the passions he was deliberately holding in check. "But I knew it was no longer any use trying to cheat myself into the belief I could see you as a friend. So I kept away."

Slowly she withdrew herself from his arms and looked at him with questioning eyes.

"And now—why have you come, now?" She caught his arm with a nervous, imperative hand. "Blake, you said just now 'It seemed to me, then, that anything else was forbidden.' *'Then.'* Has something happened since—to change that? Have circumstances altered?"

"No. Nothing is altered."

"Then—then why——"

He smiled a little—that grave, rather sweet smile she knew so well, which lightened so incredibly all the harsh and bitter lines which years of self-repression had graved on his face.

"David," he answered simply. "He's made me see that I wasn't playing fair—that I was forcing *you* to share the punishment I alone ought to bear."

"And you mean—that now——"

"I mean," he said, his voice vibrating, "that I love you so much that life—without you—is nothing. And I've come back to ask you if—when you know all there is to know—you were still willing to take that life and make of it——"

"Blake!" Impulsively she broke in, her voice aglow. "My dear, do you need to ask? You *know!* I told you—have you forgotten?—that if ever you came to think, as

I do, that nothing in the past should count against love, I should still be waiting, that I shouldn't change—except to thank God that you see things now with different eyes!"

He took her outstretched hands into his and held them closely a moment in silence, shaken to the depths of his being by her frank avowal. It was so like Pam—so like that honest, brave sincerity of hers to speak straight out and acknowledge the love that lay in her heart. There was none of the elusiveness, the self-conscious hesitation that some women might have shown. Without any fear of love or of that shadow from the past which menaced love, with no back thought she gave herself as simply and candidly as a child.

With an effort Blake withstood the overpowering desire which swept him to take her at her words and let the past slide—to gather her into his arms and crush those tender, curving lips beneath his own. Slowly, grudgingly, he relinquished his clasp of her hands.

"Wait!" he said, his voice roughened. "Wait—you must hear the whole truth first. Then you shall judge. And if you feel then that you can't give me what I ask—why, I shall understand. God knows, there are few women who would!"

"Must you tell me, Blake?" she begged beseechingly. "I've told you—I don't care what you've done."

"I must," he answered firmly. "Oh, beloved, do you think I *want* to tell you—to paint myself any blacker in your eyes than need be?"

A faint, tremulous little smile quivered round her mouth.

"I don't think I'm afraid of a patch of black paint," she said.

And then, as he began to speak, the smile faded and all the tenderness and courage of her womanhood dawned and grew in her face while she listened.

". . . There was no excuse for me, except that I was young and believed myself profoundly in love with this

woman who had tossed me aside as coolly as though I were an old shoe. . . . I went mad I think, for the time being, and when some men I knew turned up and suggested our making a night of it together in Edinburgh, I jumped at the chance, glad of anything that would take my thoughts off my own affairs. The next morning I realized that a man's death lay at my door because I hadn't been in a fit state to do my work. . . . That brought me to my senses. It broke my life into two separate parts. There was the time before that awful thing happened—and the time afterwards. Nothing else. . . . Before—there had been the promise of all a man wants in life, the prospect of making a big success in the profession I loved—the whole world open to me. Afterwards, it was as if an iron door had closed against me, cutting me off from everything that counted. I felt I was no longer fit to mix with my fellow human beings—instead, I was accountable for the death of one of them. As a surgeon I had failed—failed utterly and inexcusably. I could no longer dare to fight disease and death; I'd shown myself unfit."

He ceased speaking, but Pam still waited mutely. She sensed that he had something more to say, and presently he recommenced, his voice toned to an emotionless dead level.

"So I threw up everything—friends, profession, all that goes to the making of life, and went abroad. . . . And then, by the irony of fate, an uncle died soon afterwards leaving me a large fortune. It was like offering a starving man a bag of diamonds. The uttermost it could do for me was to give me freedom of action—freedom to travel, to cut myself off from the rest of the world, liberty to live the life of a recluse. I roamed the world till I was sick and tired"—the dead level of emotionless speech cracked suddenly and the stark agony of those years of wandering vibrated anew in his voice. "No amount of traveling could kill my thoughts—the grinding memory of

what I'd done. Nothing in this world hurts like futile remorse. I'd have died gladly, thankfully, if by so doing I could have given back the life I'd taken. . . . At last, I came back to England, bought Boscowen, and found in sheer hard physical work the only relief possible. . . . And then—*you* came——" He stopped abruptly. His utterance failed him, and only his eyes, dark with the pain of ceaseless and terrible remembrance, still spoke to her. And it was to that pain that all that was woman in her answered.

"Oh, you poor, poor boy!" Her arms went round him and she drew his head down on to her shoulder, holding him to her with that limitless, unspeakable tenderness of the eternal mother which lies somewhere in the heart of every woman. "Blake—beloved—it's all over now. I'm so glad you've told me, because now you won't ever be alone—like that—again. There'll always be someone who understands. Oh, my dear—my dear——" Her voice trembled and broke. She felt submerged, drowned beneath the tide of pity which swept over her—pity for a man's splendid life ruined by a boyish folly, ineffable pity for the agony he had suffered during that irrevocable "afterwards."

It was long before either of them spoke again. But at last Blake drew away from her.

"Listen," he said. "Before you offer me what you are offering—before you give your life into my keeping, you must realize what it means—what it may mean. That boy for whose death I am responsible must have had kith and kin to whom he was son or brother, friends who loved him. You can imagine how they would feel towards—me. I don't know them, I may never meet them, and they may never learn who was the man who robbed them of his life. But it's always a possibility—a hideous possibility—that I, or you if you were my wife, might meet them, get to know them as friends—and then find out the truth. You can

guess—imagine what that would mean—the nightmare horror of the whole ghastly business. Are you ready—brave enough—to face that?"

Pam lifted her face to his. Her eyes were very bright and steady—like two altar-lights serenely burning.

"Yes," she said simply. "I'm ready—ready to face anything with and for you, Blake."

He stooped and kissed her lips—such a kiss as holds something sacramental, the mystic mingling of passion and of love's purer elements of supreme tenderness and worship. And with that kiss Pam entered into her woman's kingdom.

CHAPTER XXIV

SEVERAL PEOPLE'S LOVE AFFAIRS

THE days that followed were rather wonderful ones. We are so rarely given a second chance of happiness in this world, and when you have met love face to face and, driven by circumstances, passed him by, it is the most glorious and wonderful thing if he turns back on life's high road and comes to meet you once again.

So it seemed to Pam, who had been schooling herself for so many long weary weeks to the knowledge that her way and Blake's must henceforth lie apart, as though some magic alchemy had transformed the whole world. Sunset behind the Estérels, with the mountains limned in misty grey against a background of *vieux rose,* moonrise over the still, evening sea, the scent of flowers, the red of rocks and the blue of sky and water, all seemed a thousand times more beautiful than they had ever been before. Sometimes their beauty almost made her heart ache as she and Blake would stroll together in that villa garden where they had found each other at last.

"It's almost too good to be true!" she exclaimed one day without preface.

"What is?" asked Blake.

"You—and me," she answered, smiling. "Our 'happy-ever-after' ending. You were such a stubborn, self-willed man"—teasingly—"that I thought we were bound to have a sad ending!"

His eyes smiled down at her.

"If you'd only known how difficult it was to be so 'stubborn'! Even now," he added, with a flash of gravity, "I'm not sure that I ought to have ceased being stubborn."

She laid her hand lightly across his mouth.

"Hush! I'm sure," she said swiftly. "Quite, quite sure."

The memory of what David had said to her when he was told the news of their engagement lay warm within her heart.

Bravo, Pam! So few women have the pluck to take their happiness when there's a seeming lion in the path. I'm glad you have had it. If old Blake had committed half the sins in the Decalogue, I'd still say—marry him, and God bless you! He's a *man.*"

Judy, rejoicing in her own new-found happiness, had been very tender and understanding in her felicitations, even though she realized that Pam's engagement to Blake inevitably meant the downfall of her hopes for Bay.

"I'm afraid he'll take it hard," she confided regretfully to David. "Bay doesn't like being balked—and he's not used to it. Women have spoilt him rather."

"My dear," responded David, "we none of us like being balked, but a lot of us jolly well have to get used to it. And the sooner we bring a little philosophy to bear upon the matter, the better."

Judy laughed and shook her head.

"Bay and philosophy are about as far apart as the poles," she said, with even more truth than perhaps she was aware of.

Bubbles recognized the news of his sister's engagement with a characteristically fervent hug, remarking with a grin: "It seems as if the only thing left is for me to get off with Sheila!"

"Why don't you, Bubbles?" Pam asked him quickly.

He hesitated, looking at her with a curious, half-puzzled expression in his blue eyes.

"I don't know," he said at last, in an embarrassed way. "She's a great darling, isn't she? But—oh, I dunno!"

He swung round on his heel and went off abruptly, leaving her alone to reflect with sisterly concern upon his state of mind. She thought she could understand something of the conflict that was going on within his boyish soul. On the one hand, there was Sheila, young and sweet and fresh as a handful of spring flowers, holding for him all the natural attraction which seventeen has for twenty; on the other, Yvonne de Brécourt, with her passionate beauty and all the veiled allure of a clever, experienced woman of the world.

To Pam it seemed as though a fight for the possession of Bubbles' soul was going on between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and she was horribly afraid that the latter might triumph. Sheila's weapons seemed so delicately, terribly frail against the other woman's whole polished armoury—just youth and the shy, sweet charm of a girl's secret adoration—for that she was in love with Bubbles Pam felt almost certain—whereas she was heavily handicapped by youth's inexperience and that hypersensitiveness of girlhood which is so easily hurt and misled.

Blake endeavoured to cheer her up when Pam voiced her fears to him.

"Don't worry, belovedest," he said reassuringly. "Bubbles is only passing through a phase common to every boy of his age—that of a wild adoration for a married woman considerably his senior. He'll get over it, and then honest little Sheila will come into her own."

But Pam looked unconvinced.

"I wish I felt as sure of that as you do," she said dubiously. "Suppose—supposing Madame de Brécourt got him to marry her?"

"It would make you very unhappy, wouldn't it, if anything of that kind happened to Bubbles?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "I should never be happy if Bubbles wasn't. You see, after you, he counts with me more than anyone else in the world." But even as she spoke her thoughts flew back to the past when it had been her adored Miles who had counted more than anyone else, and for a moment the sick, aching longing for his presence almost overpowered her. It would have doubled her happiness if he had been here to share it. He had always rejoiced so completely, so utterly in anything that meant happiness for her.

"I'm glad you put in the words 'after you,'" observed Blake swiftly. "Bubbles seems to occupy your thoughts to such an extent that I'm not at all sure I'm not a bit jealous of him."

Thrusting the pain called up by the memory of Miles behind her, Pam smiled up at him.

"You've no need to be," she replied gaily. "And no one knows it better than you do, you spoilt person." After which the conversation lapsed into that particular variety which seems infinitely wonderful and important to lovers themselves but has very small interest for the world at large.

So the days passed on, goldenly happy for the two pairs of lovers, and with each succeeding day David recovered health and strength, until very soon he was becoming restively anxious to fix the date of his marriage to Judy.

"I shan't feel sure of you till you're my wife," he told her. "It's so amazing to think you actually belong to me, sweetheart, that it wants something tremendously definite to make it seem real."

"Well, heaven knows marriage is definite enough," answered Judy, with a fleeting backward thought to the long, arid years she had passed with Radley Sarton.

"Ah, don't think of that!" he returned hastily, following

her thought with that swift, sensitive understanding which was so essentially characteristic of him. "Don't think of the past. *Our* marriage is going to be definite enough—but it's going to be definitely beautiful."

A faint, tender smile hovered round Judy's lips. She knew that their marriage would be just like that, if David said it would be. She accepted his assurance with absolute trust and contentment, and was only conscious of a little tranquil wonderment at the devious ways in which happiness had come at last both to her and to Pamela.

The season at Le Geyt was already drawing to an end. The day for the return of the whole party to England had been fixed, and Pam had been congratulating herself upon the fact that Bubbles had seen comparatively little of Madame de Brécourt since David's illness had first effected a break between them, when all at once an unexpected invitation came for Bubbles and Sheila to lunch with her at Château Fleuri. When Pam heard of it, she was frankly puzzled. It semeed to her such an extraordinary proceeding for a woman of Yvonne's type to invite to her house the girl who was undoubtedly her rival in Bubble's affections. But when she voiced her doubts and bewilderment to Blake he merely laughed amusedly.

"Why, my dear girl, you ought to be delighted. She's obviously realized that it's not worth while her competing any longer against Sheila—youth's bound to win in the long run—and she's hauling down her flag."

The explanation sounded feasible enough, and it reassured Pamela to such an extent that she watched the two young people set off for this final visit to Château Fleuri without any apprehension. But both she and Blake had been very completely mistaken in their estimate of Yvonne de Brécourt. That she was keenly alive to the fact that Sheila's presence threatened her own domination of Bubbles was very true, but in imagining that she was preparing to yield tamely to a younger woman—and a mere girl, at that

—Blake had strangely miscalculated. Nor was it by chance that she had invited Bubbles and Sheila to come to the Château together. The invitation had been sent for a very deliberate purpose. She wanted Bubbles to see and compare the two women who for the moment counted in his life more than anyone else, and she had every intention that the result of this ordeal by comparison should be an absolute triumph for herself.

It was easy enough for her, in her position as hostess, to manœuvre matters to her own satisfaction—to focus the limelight solely on herself, as it were. A young Frenchman completed the party at lunch, but, skilfully leaving him to amuse Sheila, Yvonne herself paid very little attention to him, devoting herself almost exclusively to Bubbles. She was exquisitely gowned, with that meticulous attention to detail which transforms a woman's toilette into an individual frame designed to enhance her own particular beauty. Whenever the conversation became general, she seemed to hold the pivot of it in her hands, delicately twisting it whichever way she willed, and occasionally—even more delicately—she succeeded, without the slightest sign of its being intentional, in making Sheila's impulsive girlish utterances appear a trifle gauche and *ingénue*.

When at length the after-lunch coffee and cigarettes had been disposed of, she contrived in some occult manner that the young Frenchman should carry Sheila off into the garden, while she herself was left alone with Bubbles. And it was then that cleverly, remorselessly, and with an incomparable finesse, she set herself to charm the boy back to his wavering allegiance. Within an hour Bubbles was physically and metaphorically on his knees, caught up and enmeshed in a glamour of beauty, and scented air, and soft, warm, slumbrous shadows stealing across the blind-dimmed room where they sat.

"Yvonne! Yvonne!" he whispered hoarsely, his arms round her slender, yielding body, his head pressed against

her breast. "Oh, loveliest in all the world, I can't think why you should care—like that—for me!"

"Can't you, Bubbles?" She had a wonderful voice, low-pitched and a trifle husky, and the three little words sounded like the tenderest caress. "Ah, *bien-aimé*, I do not think it would be a ver' difficult matter for any woman to care for you. That child"—she paused hesitantly—"the little Sheila—she is not far from caring."

"Sheila!" All at once Sheila seemed to have receded very far away—to have become a little, insignificant schoolgirl, and in a vague, puzzled fashion Bubbles wondered why, latterly, she should have occupied such a prominent position on his mental horizon. But only for a moment. Then the vision of Sheila's young face, with its wide, innocent grey eyes, faded, and all that mattered was the dark, *séduisante* face bent above his own.

"Yvonne, will you marry me—when will you marry me?" he stammered breathlessly.

"Am I going to marry you, Bubbles? I—don't know." She smiled half mockingly, and he started up to his feet.

"But you must—you shall! Loveliest"—he caught her by the wrists, dragging her to her feet beside him. "You meant it—you meant that you cared?"

"Did I? Yes, I think I did." The half-mocking smile changed, grew tender and passionate together. "Yes, I will marry you, my Bubbles."

An hour later, out in the bright sunlight, his hand on the steering-wheel of the car as he headed it for home, Bubbles felt curiously shaken. The faint sweet perfume that emanated from Yvonne was absent, her soft, *trainante* voice no longer sounded in his ears. There was only the open road and the dancing sunlight, and Sheila's erect little figure seated beside him in the car. It was like coming out of a dream into reality. And when Sheila's clear young voice broke in on his thoughts, it merely served to emphasize the contrast.

"I don't like her, Bubbles," she observed quietly and reflectively. "I wasn't sure before. But now I know I don't. It's—there's something in her eyes—some expression. It reminds one of a bird of prey—quite cool and calculating and yet somehow violent."

"May I ask"—Bubbles' voice was as hard as ice—"may I ask if you're referring to Madame de Brécourt?"

Sheila lifted a pair of frank grey eyes.

"Why, of course—who else?"

"Then all I can say is that it's absurd for a girl of your age—just out of the schoolroom—to set yourself up in judgment upon a woman like Yvonne." Bubbles spoke rather grandiloquently, and Sheila glanced at him again in open and somewhat amused astonishment.

"And what about a boy of your age?" she retorted. It had not entered her head that Bubbles could be genuinely attracted by a woman so much his senior.

"That's different—I'm a man. And I tell you that you can't even begin to understand a woman like Madame de Brécourt. She's known what it is to be very unhappy—and—and it's that that has made her so wonderful, I think."

Sheila gasped.

"Wonderful? Do you"—she faltered a little—"do you think her—wonderful, Bubbles?"

"I do," he replied firmly—so firmly that Sheila subsided into shaken silence, feeling that her world had suddenly tumbled down. And that night, as she lay wakefully in bed, staring into the darkness with piteous, puzzled eyes, she made acquaintance for the first time in her life with some of that strange bewilderment and pain which is so often man's gift to woman.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WEB

ENGLAND once more! As she stepped out of the train at Trelyan station, a soft, overcast April sky brought home to Pam very forcibly the realization that those wonderful blue and gold days by the Mediterranean were already committed to the past. For a moment an odd, unaccountable foreboding of evil flashed over her. It was like the sudden slight chill on a hot summer's day when for a few moments a vagrant cloud obscures the sun. She shivered involuntarily, and only by an effort contrived to shake off the feeling as the others of the party gathered round to say good-bye before taking their several ways homeward—Judy to Trethry, Blake, accompanied by David and Sheila, to Boscowen.

Five minutes later she and Bubbles were slipping through the lanes in the high dogcart which one of the grooms had brought to the station to meet them, and again, as the familiar country-side unrolled itself before them, Pam felt that same inexplicable quiver of apprehension run through her. This time, however, it connected itself with something tangible—with a letter that was reposing in the corner of her travelling-bag. It was as though some invisible wire had flashed a message from her heart to her brain—a message which sought and found the root of that vague fear which troubled her.

The letter in question was one that she had received from Bay Sarton a few days prior to her departure from

Le Geyt. She had left it unanswered because it seemed to her in many ways altogether unanswerable. At the time she had dismissed it easily enough from her thoughts. Blake was close at hand, and her happiness had seemed so secure that even the veiled threat contained in the letter had appeared of very little importance. But now, under this cheerless English sky, with those idyllic days on the southern shores of France definitely behind her, it returned to her in a new and sinister light.

"I hear you are engaged to Blake Carrington," Bay had written. "I warned you, before I left France, not to get engaged to anyone during my absence. It's such a useless proceeding on your part, Pam! I shall never let you marry anyone except me—or, if you do, you know exactly what will follow. I told you that, too, you silly dear."

Words jestingly written, as Bay always jested, yet, as always, containing an underlying suggestion of grim earnest. At present, Sarton was still in London, detained by certain unexpected developments in regard to the business matters which had originally called him there, and inwardly Pam hoped he might be detained indefinitely. There was something unnerving about that gay, arrogant persistency of his. It gave her a trapped feeling—as though her feet were caught and tangled in some impalpable web which might one day tighten until she could no longer free herself from its coils.

She was fast working herself up into a state of inward panic by the time the dogcart slowed down and swung in betwixt the gates of Rakehill, and then the appearance of Toby round a curve of the drive, with Tatters tearing wildly ahead, and an impression of something new, something different, in the general air of things, wrenched her thoughts away from the disturbing letter into a pleasanter channel.

"Hullo—ullo!" Toby, looking unusually brisk and businesslike, came up to the side of the dogcart as Bubbles pulled the raking chestnut between the shafts to a somewhat

abrupt standstill, while Tatters, half delirious with excitement, tore round and round in ecstatic circles, barking idiotically.

Tossing the reins to the groom, Bubbles sprang out of the trap and helped Pam down, and the Wayne family proceeded to exchange greetings.

"Notice any difference?" inquired Toby carelessly, as they all three strolled up the drive together. In spite of his would-be nonchalance, there was a certain embarrassed self-consciousness discernible in the question, and Pam, who had been futilely endeavouring to stem the torrent of Tatters' tempestuous welcome, went off into a shout of laughter.

"What a kid you are, Toby! Of course, I've noticed differences! You've had the lodge done up—and jolly nice it looks too! And the drive put in order," she added, glancing down with satisfaction at its clean, smooth surface. The moss which had crept insidiously between the stones had been removed, and the grass on either side no longer grew tall and rank, but had been mown to a velvety smoothness.

As they approached the house, the "differences" of which Toby had spoken became still more manifest. The roof showed none of the familiar green patches of lichen amongst its plum-red tiles, while the ivy and creeper that clung about its walls had been trimmed and trained into shape. A new coat of paint on door and window-panes had replaced the old, sun-blistered one, and altogether the whole place presented an unwontedly spruce and well-cared-for appearance.

"Oh, Toby!" Pam gave an ecstatic little gasp of delight. "How did you manage it in the time—and all by yourself?" she added teasingly.

"The time was a bit of a stumbling-block, I'll acknowledge," he admitted, "the British workman being what he is. But 'by myself'! Do you imagine that a man can do

nothing without feminine assistance, you vain little person?"

Pam made a face at him.

"Precious little," she returned. "You've mostly either got to be coaxed or driven—without knowing it."

She was only part way through with the process of unpacking when Lucian Gale appeared on the scenes.

"It's good to see you back," he told her, after the first interchange of greetings.

"And, do you know, it's rather good to *be* back," she returned. "Loo," she went on impulsively, after a pause, "why didn't you write to me?"

"About your engagement, you mean?"

She nodded.

"Yes. You were so—so dear about it all before I went away—so good to me. . . . I—I couldn't quite understand your not writing."

"Couldn't you?" He was silent a moment. Then he said: "It wasn't difficult to be 'good to you' then. We were both in the same boat"—a trifle grimly. "Afterwards, when I heard about you and Carrington, I had to get used to that idea all over again. . . . I'm square with it now," he went on, "and, you know, old dear, that the fact that you're going to be happy—well, it makes up in a measure for the other part."

Pam held out an impulsive little hand and squeezed his.

"Oh, Loo, I do wish you'd fall in love with someone else," she said unsteadily. "It—it would make me so much happier."

"I'm sorry I can't oblige—even with such a laudable object in view," he answered dryly. Then his voice softened. "Don't worry about me, my dear. I shall pull through somehow. I'm not the first man who's had to take the knock, you know"—with a smile that gave her a queer little ache right down in the depths of her heart. He drew a step nearer to her. "We'll speak of it just

once—now—and then never again, because I want you to understand, Pam, that even though it's no good, I don't regret loving you. I never shall. My love for you, ever since I was a raw youngster, has been the best thing in my life. It's stood for something—something rather wonderful, and pulled me round more than one bad corner. There've been times when, if I hadn't loved you, I might have side-slipped badly. Probably you don't understand what a woman like you can mean to a man. For me you've always meant the whole splendidness of life—the cleanness and sweetness of it." He hesitated, embarrassed by the sudden depth of feeling which had momentarily broken down his reserve. Then he held out his hands and she laid hers within them. "The man who marries you is the luckiest man in the whole world, Pam dear. The next luckiest is the man who loves you and knows what a pal you can be." He stooped his head and kissed first one and then the other of the hands he held. "God bless you, little pal," he said.

During the days which followed, in spite of her own happiness, Pamela knew a good many sad moments. She was far too fond of Loo not to feel very keenly the pain she knew her engagement had inflicted on him, and often, when he was laughing and joking just in his usual way, facing the thing out gallantly and without fuss, she was conscious of an aching sympathy that brought her very near to tears.

Nor could she help contrasting the different ways in which Bay and Loo had received the fact of her engagement to Blake. Loo, in spite of his loss, could yet subordinate his own feelings and be ungrudgingly glad of her happiness, giving her, steadily and determinedly, the same good-comradeship which had been theirs ever since their mutual schooldays. Whereas Bay, with characteristic arrogance, flatly refused to accept her decision. It did not matter to him at all that Blake alone, was the man who could make her happiness. The latter was a secondary consideration,

for Sarton would never be the unselfish lover, putting the loved one first. And even now, when her promise was definitely given to another man, Pam felt nervously sure that Bay meant to fight it relentlessly, and there were times when sheer, unreasoning terror overwhelmed her lest in some way he should contrive to come between them, to set them apart.

Once or twice she was tempted to confide her fears to Blake, but she refrained, knowing that he would only laugh them aside. And, looked at from a common-sense point of view, she felt he would be justified. No man, —or woman either—could come between herself and Blake, provided they trusted each other. Yet the fear of Sarton persisted. *"I shall never let you marry anyone except me,"* he had written, and that sentence, with its curious definiteness of assertion, cut across many of her most perfect moments with Blake, like the sound of some distant warning bell.

Meanwhile, the date for David's and Judy's marriage had been fixed, and the preparations for the wedding helped in a measure to distract her thoughts. It had been arranged that it should take place from Trethry, at the little old grey stone church in Trelyan, and while David and Judy were away on the brief honeymoon which was all they proposed to take, Sheila was to stay with the Waynes at Rakehill. Ultimately she was to make her home with her brother and his wife at Trethry.

"I shall feel horribly *de trop*," she told Pam. "Though Judy's such a darling I know she'll try not to let me feel it."

In her own mind Pam queried whether Sheila's stay at Trethry would be of very long duration. She had no inkling of what had taken place at Château Fleuri. Sheila had given her an extremely superficial account of the visit, and Bubbles had been very uncommunicative, and now that the latter was completely removed from the influence

of Yvonne de Brécourt, Pam secretly nourished a hope that he would proceed to fall whole-heartedly in love with Sheila. He had been, as it were, balancing on the verge of the precipice for some time.

But the planning of other people's lives is not infrequently a singularly unprofitable form of occupation, and on the morning of Judy's wedding-day Pamela's sisterly hopes received a douche of cold water. It happened at breakfast—of all times of the day the one when a disappointment of any kind hits one hardest. Bubbles looked up suddenly from a letter he was reading and announced with heightened colour:

"Madame de Brécourt is coming over here for the summer. She's taken Four Corners Bungalow for the next three months, and arrives to-morrow."

"What!" exclaimed Pam. "You don't mean to say that that woman has followed you to England!"

The exclamation broke from her spontaneously—the involuntary crystallization of her inmost thought. But it was an unfortunate speech. Bubbles sprang up from the table, his good-looking young face dark with anger.

"I'll thank you to adopt a different tone in regard to Madame de Brécourt," he began stormily. But Pam, roused to indignation, interrupted him.

"Why should I?" she demanded, in stinging tones. "Everybody in Le Geyt knew that she was an adventuress!"

"Then every one in Le Geyt knew wrong," returned Bubbles furiously. "And whatever she may have been in the past, you may as well know, now as later, that in the future she's going to be my wife."

"Your—wife?" The indignation had died out of Pam's voice, to be succeeded by a chill note of uttermost dismay. This was worse—worse even than she had expected. Involuntarily she thought of Sheila, and the recollection of a certain wistfulness which had deepened in the girl's eyes

of late made her throat contract. She felt as though wave after wave of tragedy were rolling towards her.

Meanwhile Toby, utterly in the dark, was gazing in amazement from one to the other. But, ignorant though he was of the actual circumstances, he was quick enough to perceive the electricity in the atmosphere and to endeavor to reduce it.

"This is all very interesting," he drawled, with a humorous twinkle in his light-blue eyes. "Matrimony seems to be in the air. Judy to-day—and, apparently, our only Bubbles to-morrow—or soon after. Why have I been kept in the dark regarding the existence of my future sister-in-law?"

For a moment, in spite of her distress, Pam was conscious of a flash of sheer amusement, as she recognized the incongruity of any relationship between her brother and Madame de Brécourt—Toby so pre-eminently of the outdoor English sporting type, with his clean, well-groomed appearance suggestive of unlimited baths and fresh air; Yvonne, with her dark, sensuous beauty, feline in every fibre of her, artificial and exotic to the last degree. The transient flicker of amusement died out abruptly as Pam listened to Bubbles' response to his brothers' question.

"Yvonne—Madame de Brécourt is a Frenchwoman who has done me the honour to promise that she will be my wife," said Bubbles, with all the defiant dignity of one-and-twenty, and with that he got up and stalked out of the room.

Toby glanced across at Pamela with raised brows, but if a certain amount of concern evidenced itself in his eyes, there was no sign of it in his lazy, pleasant voice when he spoke.

"Well," he said imperturbably, "sufficient unto the day are the weddings thereof. Isn't it about time we arrayed ourselves in our glad rags? At what hour does the show begin, Pam?"

"The wedding is fixed for eleven o'clock, if that's what you mean," replied Pam tonelessly.

The thought which Bubbles' news had thrust temporarily out of her mind had recurred abruptly and with renewed significance. Bay had returned to Trethry last night, in order to be present at his step-mother's wedding. At eleven o'clock, in the little grey church at Trelyan, she would see him for the first time since he had left Le Geyt. Afterwards—— Again the recollection of his words pierced her like a sword: *"I shall never let you marry anyone except me."*

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CHOICE

PAM, surrounded by a small army of vases, was trying to combat with the inevitable feeling of flatness which pervades the day after a wedding by busying herself arranging the flowers for the house. She felt the need of occupation of some kind, but even as her fingers sought selectively amongst the sheaf of flowers that lay beside her, while her scissors snipped the sharp thorns which teethed the rose-stems, her thoughts were principally concerned with the happenings of yesterday.

Not with the wedding itself—that had been a very happy little event, unclouded by the faintest shadow, and it had occurred to Pam, as she watched David and Judy drive away together, that there is something more beautiful, perhaps, in the quiet, selfless joy of two lovers who have at last come together after experiencing the deep waters of misunderstanding and delay than in the rapturous gladness of young, untried love.

But there were two things which troubled her considerably. One was Bubbles' obsession for Madame de Brécourt. It had been a great shock to her to learn that the Frenchwoman had come to England. It seemed significant of a very determined intention on her part not to let Bubbles escape, and no matter how infatuated he might be with her for the moment, Pamela was only too sure that if he married her he would repent it bitterly. Every

sensitive instinct within her told her that Yvonne was not to be trusted to make him happy. She was a woman whose love for a man would flare passionately and then die out—fickle to the core of her soul. And then there would remain for her a secure position as Bubbles' wife—and other loves—while for him there would be only the dust and ashes of disillusionment and the shackles of a miserable marriage.

The other matter which troubled Pam's thoughts was the knowledge that sooner or later she and Bay Sarton had to come to an understanding of some kind. At Trethry yesterday, after the wedding service was over, he had drawn her aside for a moment.

"I've not offered you my congratulations on your engagement, Pam," he had said, "because they would be so entirely superfluous." Then, with that mocking, dare-devil light in his eyes which she had learned to dread, he added: "You foolish person! Do you imagine for one moment that I'm going to let you slip like that?"

Some of the other guests had joined them then, so that he could say no more, but the covert, arrogant threat had lingered in her memory, fretting her, and she reflected now that the sooner she and Bay had matters out between them the better.

"May I come in?"

In spite of herself, Pam jumped as the voice of the very man who was occupying her thoughts sounded abruptly in her ears, and Bay himself, without waiting for her permission, stepped across the threshold of the open French window.

"How you startled me!" she exclaimed, nervously gathering up the flowers she had let fall at his unlooked-for entrance.

He laughed.

"Surely you expected me?" he said.

"I? No, why should I expect you?" She pulled

towards her a bowl of roses to which she had already given its finishing touches and began rather feverishly re-arranging it, bending her face determinedly over her task.

All at once the bowl was whisked away from in front of her and her hands imprisoned by a pair of strong brown ones.

"Stop pretending that you're arranging those confounded roses, and I'll tell you," he said. "That is, if you need any telling. Do you, Pam?"

Something in his voice warned her that the moment had come when the unacknowledged battle which she had been waging against Bay's domination ever since they had first met had now got to be fought out to the bitter end, and she avoided his eyes, bracing herself for resistance.

"Yes," she said at last, very quietly. "I think you had better tell me—why you've come."

The next moment she felt herself swept up into his arms, lifted almost off her feet, so that she swayed helpless in his clasp. Above her own, she could see his face twisted with passion, his dark eyes blazing down at her. She struggled against him, and then, as though the protesting movement of her slender body within his arms snapped some last link of self-control which held him, he bent his head, his mouth found hers and he was kissing her with a fierce, ungovernable passion that overwhelmed her like the rush of a torrent suddenly released.

Her senses reeled. She felt as though she were being submerged by some force infinitely stronger than herself, and when at last he took his mouth from hers, she dragged herself from his arms and leant against the table, spent and breathless.

"Bay—you're mad—mad!" she whispered at last, weakly. Her face was very white, the only colour in it the quivering scarlet curve of her lips and the black-flecked hazel

of eyes which stared at him with an expression of shrinking horror.

"Yes," he returned, his voice roughened. "I am mad —mad for you. And if you won't give yourself to me, I'll take you by force from Blake Carrington or any other man."

As though the sound of Blake's name somehow restored her shaken courage, she pulled herself together and faced him with a gallant attempt at composure.

"It's—it's nonsense to talk like that, Bay," she said, compelling herself to speak steadily. "This isn't the Stone Age, you know—you can't force any woman to marry you."

"Can't I? That shows how little you know. When a man wants a woman as I want you, he'll stop at nothing —*nothing,* do you understand?—to get her." He made a sudden violent movement towards her, but she retreated from him swiftly, her hands outstretched to ward him off.

"Bay, you're being absurd—ridiculous! Don't you see it?" she said, a scathing edge of contempt in her voice that would have brought nine men out of ten to their senses. "I love Blake and I'm going to marry him, and nothing you can say or do will prevent it."

He stood still, motionless where she warded him off, and slowly the expression of his face altered, a curious look of menace mingling with the passion that still smouldered in his eyes.

"Are you so sure of that?" he said, in an oddly quiet tone of voice.

"Quite, quite sure," she returned with conviction. Subconsciously she felt as if Blake were with her, upholding her. For a moment the room was filled with silence—a strange, waiting silence. When at last Bay's voice broke across it, it was like the clash of steel on steel.

"Then you are wrong," he said. "Utterly wrong. Believe me, Pam, with one word I can stop your marrying Carrington. If you knew all about him, he would be the

last man on earth that you would ever think of marrying."

As he spoke, it seemed to Pamela as though all her fear of him vanished. She was conscious only of scorn—bitter, infinite scorn of the man who would strike at another when he was not there to defend himself. Woman-like, she made no allowance for the driving force of passion which was urging him on.

"I think I know all about *you,* now, Bay," she said icily. "And I can assure you that the 'last man on earth I should ever marry' is a man who would try to blacken another behind his back."

But her contempt left him untouched. He gave a short laugh.

"I've no intention of doing that. But what I *do* intend"—his voice hardened into unrelenting decision—"is to compel Carrington himself to tell you why he can't—why he *dare not*—marry you. And if he's too much of a coward to do that, then, and then only, I'll tell you myself."

Despite her valiant defiance of him, Pamela felt her heart sink. He sounded so sure, so triumphantly sure of his facts, that once again the dread which had been torturing her of late rushed over afresh. She could feel the slender filaments of the web of some adverse fate closing slowly round her, tightening their hold about her. Still she struggled against them.

"Blake may tell me anything he wishes," she said simply. "But I am quite sure that nothing he could tell me would come between us or alter my love for him. Love—doesn't change like that, Bay."

There was something very sweet and brave and tender about the little speech, and Sarton's eyes softened.

"Pam," he said suddenly, "I'd so much rather not tell you—or force Carrington to tell you—why he can't marry you." There was genuine unwillingness and regret in his

tones. "Won't you believe me when I tell you that there *is* a reason?"

"Do you mean, will I break off my engagement with him because you—*you*—imagine there is some reason against it?" The tenderness had died out of her voice, replaced by a cutting contempt which roused every evil feeling in the man.

"Yes, I do mean that. And if you won't do it—if you decline to believe what I say—you'll be sorry for it as long as you live," he returned violently.

"Are you threatening me?"

He shook his head.

"No, I'm warning you."

With a slight shrug of her shoulders, Pam turned aside and deliberately began rearranging a vase of flowers. The gesture was as good as a dismissal. For a moment Bay hesitated, still restrained by some fugitive instinct of pity and regret—perhaps even of shame.

"Pam"—— he began, almost pleadingly.

She made no answer, but continued to arrange her flowers with an air of complete detachment.

"Oh, damn you!" The exclamation broke savagely from Bay's lips, and without another word he turned and left her, in his eyes an expression of reckless determination.

Two hours later, in the living-room at Boscowen Farm, Sarton and Blake stood facing each other. The eyes of the former were keen, cool, and calculating, alight with a curious triumph; those of the latter held an impenetrable expression as though deliberately and by a sheer effort of will he forced them to mask his feelings.

"You can't marry Pamela."

The words had left Bay's lips almost a full minute before Blake made any answer.

"I'm afraid," he said at last, "I don't quite understand what the matter has to do with you."

He spoke quietly, but there was a dangerous vibration in his voice.

"Will you explain?" he added curtly.

Bay gave a short laugh.

"Oh, yes," he said easily. "I'll explain right enough. Do you remember something that happened five—nearly six years ago now, in Scotland, at a place called Aberlochie?"

Blake's eyes narrowed suddenly.

"Quite a good many things happened at Aberlochie," he answered guardedly. "Perhaps you could be a little more explicit."

The other man shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it really necessary?" he asked.

"I think so," responded Blake quietly.

"Very well, then. The happening to which I refer took place at Craigie Lodge. You performed an operation on a boy there—who died in consequence. That right?"

Despite Blake's outward composure, a quick, indrawn breath betrayed that Sarton's challenge had gone home.

"Your facts are correct," he acknowledged slowly. "Do you mind telling me how you came by them?"

"Oh, that's quite simple. I was staying at the Lodge at the time—one of the shooting party there."

"I don't remember seeing you."

Again Bay laughed.

"Probably not. The only time we met was in one of the corridors—you were coming away from the room where that boy had just died, and I don't fancy you were in a fit state at the moment to recognize anyone."

Blake's thoughts bridged the five years which had intervened with a leap. He had not once thought of it since, but now, like the development of a photo upon a blank plate, the details of the picture flashed into his mind. He remembered almost reeling along the corridor, dazed and half mad for the moment, still dressed in the white overall

he had worn at the operation, and blindly passing someone as he went. He had staggered by, even brushing shoulders with the man in question. And the man had evidently been Bay Sarton.

"I think—I remember passing someone," he muttered confusedly.

Bay nodded.

"Yes. You passed me."

With an effort Blake put his next question.

"Well, and what has all this to do with my engagement to Pamela?"

"I should have thought that was obvious. Do you suppose she'd be willing to marry you if she knew—what you'd done?"

"She does know."

"She knows?" There was a note of intense astonishment in Bay's voice. "She *knows?*" he repeated incredulously.

"Yes. I'd ask no woman to marry me who didn't know the whole truth about that business. What else did you suppose?"

For a moment Bay looked taken aback, frustrated. Then all at once a new thought flashed into his eyes and his lips curled grimly.

"And does she know who it was that you killed by your bungling that night?"

If Blake winced inwardly, he showed no outward sign.

"No," he answered simply. "Because I never knew myself. It wasn't precisely a moment for introductions," he added, his voice hardening. "And afterwards, as I dare say you know, Macpherson fired me out of the house—and out of Aberlochie—without much ceremony."

Bay nodded.

"Then I'll tell you," he said slowly. "The man you killed was Miles Wayne—Pam's brother."

Complete and absolute silence followed the brief speech,

while Blake stood staring fixedly at the man who had just spoken, his face suddenly grey and rigid. It might almost have been a mask, so utterly immobile was it, save for the stark horror and torment in the staring blue eyes. Even Bay, reckless egoist that he was in every fibre of his being, felt himself flinch as he recognized his handiwork.

After what seemed an immensity of time, Blake spoke.

"Is that true?" he asked. His voice was flat and toneless.

"Yes. It's true," replied Sarton. He turned aside, instinctively evading the sight of those havoc-ridden eyes, and a heavy silence fell again between the two men. It was Bay who broke it at last.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked curiously.

Blake seemed not to have heard the question.

"Odd!" he muttered, as though speaking to himself. "She'd never let me tell her how it happened. If she had, I suppose she'd have guessed that it was Miles."

"No, she wouldn't," returned Bay swiftly. "None of the Waynes know that Miles—need not have died."

"They don't know?"

"No. Their father wouldn't have them told. They—Toby and Bubbles and Pam—all believe it was inevitable, that he just sank after the operation."

"But—but why?" asked Blake. "Why weren't they told the truth?"

"It was the old laird's idea. He would never even tell Harvard Wayne the name of the man who operated. He was a queer, idealistic old beggar, and he thought it better Wayne shouldn't know the name of the man who had killed his son—because, of course, he was bound to feel badly towards him. And Wayne himself thought Pam would never get over it if she knew that Miles' life had been simply chucked away. Only Judy and I knew the truth—I, because I was there when it all happened, and she because Harvard wrote and told her. By the way," he went on,

"your name wasn't Carrington then? You've changed it since?—significantly.

"I changed it when I inherited my uncle's money—it was his wish that I should take his name." Blake replied mechanically; the matter appeared to him of no importance.

"Ah!" The ejaculation broke from Bay's lips involuntarily. "If you hadn't done that I should have spotted you sooner. I was convinced I knew your face, all the time, but I couldn't place it. And the change of name helped to throw me off the scent."

"Well, you know now," said Blake laconically.

"Yes, I know now." Bay paused. "And Pam must know. She can't possibly marry the man who was responsible for her brother's death. I suppose you see that?"

The rigidity of Blake's face broke up. Something Pam had once said drifted back to him, like cooling water flowing over the burning, arid desert of his thoughts. *"No mistake demands a whole life in expiation."* That was her creed, her uttermost belief—a belief by which a man might save his soul alive. He remembered her face as she had uttered those words, lifted to his with bravely shining eyes.

"You'll tell her?" Like a whip-lash, Bay's voice cut across the memory.

"No," replied Blake quietly. "I shall not tell her. I think she'd be happier not knowing—just as her father thought."

Sarton checked a sudden violent movement.

"Do you mean," he demanded hotly, "that you'll let her marry you in ignorance?"

Blake turned and his blue eyes met the other man's dark ones very straightly.

"She knows that accidentally I once killed a man—and she has faced the fact and forgiven it. Intrinsically, am I any the more guilty because that man chanced to be her brother?"

"Pah! Theories like that don't count when it comes

to a matter of flesh and blood. Do you suppose any woman would willingly marry the man who killed her brother?"

"That's why I don't propose to tell her. I think she would marry me—but it would make it harder for her."

"Then you think wrong!" exclaimed Bay fiercely. "If Pam knew that Miles had died through you, she wouldn't touch you with a barge-pole. You must tell her—you've *got* to tell her!"

Blake's eyes glinted.

"Suppose you put your cards on the table?" he suggested coolly.

For a moment Bay hesitated. Then:

"Very well, damn you, I will!" he said violently. "I don't intend you to marry Pam—you can probably guess why—and I give you this way out of it. Tell her how Miles died. That'll end it."

"And supposing I don't choose to tell her?"

Sarton made a step towards him, his hands clenched. His face wore a dark look of reckless hatred.

"If you don't tell her—*I* shall," he said in a low voice of concentrated anger. "That's your choice, man. Take it or leave it."

He waited intently for Blake's answer.

"Thanks, I'll leave it," said Blake at last, quietly. Then, all at once, his quietness deserted him. He swung round on the other man, his eyes blazing. "Tell her," he thundered. "Tell her, and be damned to you! And get out of my house—*quick!*"

CHAPTER XXVII

OUT OF THE PAST

THE door of the schoolroom at Rakehill clicked open and closed again. Very slowly Pam turned away from the window, and for a moment the comparative darkness of the room, after the brilliance of the sunlight which poured down outside from a cloudless sky, obscured her sight, so that she could only discern the tallness of Blake's figure and the white blur of his face as he stood silently facing her just within the threshold. Then her vision cleared, and she saw his eyes—those blue eyes of his which never looked at her without the steady lovelight burning in them. Just so they looked at her now.

"Pam!" He came towards her, his arms outheld.

With a swift, almost fierce movement, she warded him off.

"No—no!" The words broke from her a little breathlessly. "Blake, I asked you to come because—because——" She broke off, unable to continue, and as she ceased speaking a new look came into his face—a vigilant, questioning look, as though he were all at once on guard.

"Yes!" he said. "You asked me to come. Why did you ask me, Pam?"

"I've seen Bay. . . . Can't you—can't you guess? Oh"—her face twisting—"you must know! He told me what happened at—at Aberlochie."

"The swine!" The exclamation escaped under his breath. Then he spoke aloud, very quietly.

"I'm sorry he has told you, Pam. I know it can only make things harder for you. I would have spared you that knowledge if I could."

"You would have spared me!" There was a note of bitter mockery in her voice. "You mean, I suppose, that you would have let me marry you in ignorance? All this time you have known that my brother died, *through you,* and yet you dared to ask me to be your wife!"

"No. There you wrong me. I did *not* know—until last week. If I'd known earlier, I should most certainly never have asked you to marry me."

He spoke with a quiet decision that should have carried conviction, but the contempt did not leave her eyes.

"Then why—when you did know—have you left it for Bay to tell me? Why didn't you come and tell me yourself?"

He was silent a moment. Then he said, still with that curious, repressed quietness of tone:

"Won't you try to understand, Pam? If I'd known about Miles before, as I said, I should never have told you that I cared for you. But now, now that I have told you, and that I know you care in the same way, it seemed to me you would be happier in ignorance. I meant to carry that burden alone. After all, it was only going to hurt you badly to know the truth, and it couldn't alter things now—couldn't make you *un*love me."

"Hurt me?" A hard little laugh jangled her voice. "Yes, it does hurt to find that the man you love happens to have killed your brother."

"It was an accident," he said gravely. "You know that."

"An accident?" she exclaimed passionately. "Do you call it an 'accident' when a man unfits himself for his job and then blunders another man's life away? . . . Bay

has told me how it all happened. . . . Oh——" She smote her hands together. "And you call it an 'accident'!"

"Dearest," he began. But she tore herself away from him.

Blake tried to draw her into his arms. He could see she was so overwrought that she hardly knew what she was saying.

"Don't touch me!" she exclaimed fiercely. "Can't you see—oh, can't you see that this means the end of everything between us?"

His face altered suddenly.

"Do you mean that, Pam?" he said. "You don't—you can't mean that!"

"Mean it? Of course I mean it. Why"—laughing rather hysterically—"did you suppose I should marry the man who murdered my brother?"

"Murder is a strong word."

"Not too strong. If it had been really accidental, things might have been different—though, even then—— But it wasn't an accident. It was your *fault*—it was because you'd played the fool that Miles—died." Her shaking hands went up and covered her face. "Oh, go—go!" she cried desperately.

"No," he said quietly. "I won't. Pam, you've got to listen to me." Very deliberately he took hold of her wrists and drew her hands down, in spite of her resistance, holding them so that she was compelled to face him and hear what he had to say. "You're not being fair—or reasonable. You're frightfully upset over this thing, and it's perfectly natural you should be. But it's not natural for you to be unfair. . . . I told you, long ago, that I had once killed a man, and that, though it was accidental, I was culpably to blame. And you said then that no sin, no *mistake*—and God knows it was a mistake!—should count against a man all the rest of his life. . . . Did you mean that, or did you not?"

She hesitated, flinching from the direct question. At last she answered him.

"Yes, I meant it. I could have forgiven *anything*—anything you'd done—except this."

"'Except this'! This—the very thing you were so sure you could forgive—then. All you said was merely a theory of yours, it seems—a theory that won't stand the test of reality."

"But I didn't know it was Miles! If I'd known that—I couldn't, I couldn't have forgiven it. Even—even if I forgave it, I could never forget—never forget that it was through you he died. . . . I know what you're thinking—that I've gone back on my word, that, as you say, I was just theorizing. I wasn't. But—oh, you *must* understand, Blake!"

Slowly he released her hands.

"I do understand," he said. "I understand that your creed which I thought so wonderful—your creed that no sin demands a lifetime's expiation—was just words—mere words!" A note of extreme bitterness sounded in his voice. "So be it. I accept your decree. I was a fool, I suppose, to have imagined that even your love could triumph over such a combination of circumstances. . . . And yet, somehow, I had believed it would."

She drew a quick breath, and her hand went up to her throat. Nothing hurts a woman quite so badly as the knowledge that she has shattered a man's belief in her—the belief of the man she loves.

"Blake—oh, I wish I could make you understand! Do you think it's—easy—for me to send you away? . . . It—it hurts horribly. It will hurt all my life. . . ."

"Then, my dear, why do it? Can't we, somehow, find a way?" He spoke very gently, groping to lay his hand on her hurt without hurting her afresh.

"No—no." She lifted dry, tearless eyes to his, eyes so full of a dumb anguish that they wrung his heart. "It would

always come between us. I might forget, sometimes, because—because I love you so, Blake. And then I should remember, quite suddenly, just when we were most happy together—that it was you who had killed Miles."

She spoke very quietly, her voice a little shaken, but with that last sentence Blake realized that the end had come.

"I see," he said slowly. "If it would be like that with you—then, of course, you're right to send me away. Our life together would be unbearable."

She bent her head.

"Yes," she said.

All at once she began to tremble, her whole slight body shaking helplessly. She clutched at the back of a chair, her small hands gripping it tensely.

"Oh, go—please go, Blake," she cried chokingly. "I can't bear any more."

A smothered ejaculation escaped him. Then, without another word, he turned away and left her alone.

The door closed behind him, and as the latch dropped into its place, she was struck again, as once before in that self-same room, by the little clicking noise of it. It held a curious macabre humour. It seemed so commonplace and everyday, such a usual little sound, to signify the ending of one's whole happiness in life. She clapped her hand to her mouth to suffocate the hysterical laugh that struggled in her throat. She felt her hold over herself slipping.

"I won't. . . . I won't!" she gasped, setting her teeth.

It was more than an hour later when Judy found her. She and David had returned to Trethry late the previous evening, and Judy's first visit had been to Rakehill. Not finding Pam downstairs, she mounted to the old schoolroom, and there she discovered her, sitting motionless in a straight-backed chair, staring frozenly in front of her, her hands lying folded on her knee.

"Pam!" she exclaimed, as the girl made no movement

at her entrance—she seemed unconscious of it. "Pam, what are you doing here?"

Slowly Pamela turned her head and looked at her—at first blankly, as though she hardly realized who it was. Then the frozen look died gradually out of her eyes and bewildered recognition took its place.

"Judy? . . . Judy? . . ." Her brows drew together in a puzzled fashion. She seemed to be slowly coming back in thought from some far-distant region to the present moment. "Why are you——Oh, of course!" —getting up. "You've come back—you and David."

She put her arms round the older woman's neck and embraced her warmly, but there was something in the touch of those young arms round her that tugged at Judy's heart—something clinging and appealing, different from the usual spontaneous hug wherewith Pam was won't to welcome her. She put the girl from her, laying her hands on her shoulders and surveying her critically.

"This is not quite my Pam," she said. "What's wrong?" Her quick glance took in instantly the expression of strain in the girl's eyes and a curious pinched look which seemed to have grown about her mouth—hardening it, making it look a little older.

"There's nothing wrong," said Pam. "Nothing at all." She spoke in rather a high, unnatural voice.

Judy sat down on a disreputable old couch which stood against the wall and pulled Pam down beside her.

"Tell me all about it," she said in practical tones. "Have you and Blake been squabbling, you silly children? If so, it seems to me I've just come home in time to set things right."

Pam's hazel eyes regarded her sombrely.

"Dear old Judy," she said at last. "Neither you nor anyone else can 'set things right.'"

A faint gleam of humour crossed Judy's face.

"Is it as bad as all that?"

Pam nodded smilelessly.

"Quite as bad."

The gleam died out. "Then tell me what it is," said Judy gravely. "And remember, very few things in this life are as bad as we think they are."

Pam gave a queer little strangled laugh.

"Only in this instance they happen to be worse," she said.

"Well?" queried Mrs. Sarton.

For a moment Pam hesitated.

"Haven't you seen Bay?" she asked at length.

"Bay?" A curious expression flashed into Judy's eyes and her hand moved involuntarily towards the little satchel of ivory and brocade which she had been carrying and which now lay on the sofa beside her. "No. He's gone away. He left a letter behind. Here it is." She snapped open the bag, withdrawing the letter in question, handed it to Pamela. "Can you explain it? I was going to ask you about it."

Pam's eyes ran quickly down the letter.

"DEAR JUDY"—it ran. "Sorry I can't remain at Trethry to welcome you back. If you want an explanation of my sudden departure, ask Pam. She can give it if she chooses. For once in my life I seem to have made an error of judgment in regard to your sex. So long. BAY."

For a long time Pamela sat silently staring down at the letter. It brought back vividly that last interview she had had with Sarton, yesterday afternoon, in the sunny, scented rose-garden, where, with a single sentence, he had ruthlessly cut away everything that meant her happiness.

In many ways it had been a repetition of numberless scenes that had passed between them—Bay threatening, demanding, imperiously trying to bend her will to his. But in one way it had been different—inconceivably different. He had told her at whose hands her adored Miles had met his death—at one blow stabbing both at her love and at her lover, and so violent had been her revulsion, so utter

her recoil from the man who, to serve his own ends, could be guilty of so treacherous an act, that in some inscrutable way it had freed her once and for all from any future domination of Bay's. He had done his worst, shot his final bolt, and with the knowledge that there was nothing more he could do to hurt her, that subconscious fear of him which had obsessed her died. Henceforth he was weaponless against her. And that he, too, had realized this was revealed in the last sentence contained in the scribbled note he had left behind for Judy. He had played his last stake—and lost it.

Slowly Pam lifted her eyes from Bay's letter to Judy's questioning face.

"Yes," she said. "I can explain it." And in a few bald words, speaking almost expressionless, she told Judy all that had transpired during her absence, checking her with a curious implacable insistence when she would have argued and persuaded, pleading Blake's cause.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said. "I just wanted you to know, Judy—and you can tell David. Don't you see, no amount of talking can alter things? It isn't that I don't love Blake, either. I love him just as much as ever." She shivered a little. "I suppose I always shall. But—he killed Miles. That's between us—always."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTERMATH

AT one time or another, as we journey through life, the essential solitariness of the soul is brought home to each of us, and in no way more forcibly than by the discovery of how astonishingly little the happenings which affect us most poignantly affect other people—even our nearest and dearest. A tidal wave convulses our own personal existence—swamping, perhaps, the whole of life's happiness in its course—and they hardly realize it. Or if, for a brief space, they seem to grip the immensity of one's loss, the impression quickly fades and very soon we are left to get on with life as best we can, single-handed.

Pam learned this in the weeks which followed the breaking-off of her engagement to Blake. The shock and consternation which it occasioned at first had been commensurate with the whole circumstances surrounding it. The knowledge that Carrington had been responsible for Miles' death naturally affected all the Waynes acutely and individually, and had stricken his friends, David and Judy, with dismay, while Sarton's conduct in the matter had bitterly shocked and hurt the latter. Unrepentant sinner that he was—and probably always would be—Judy had always had a very warm corner in her heart for Bay, and the depth of her affection for him was the measure of her hurt.

So that, although at first the tidal wave which had overwhelmed Pam had caught up others and swept them along on the fringe of its rush, when it had spent itself those who had received only minor injuries recovered and were soon proceeding with the normal business of existence, conscious of nothing beyond a slight additional weight to the burden of disappointments and regrets which we are all destined to carry.

But to Pam herself the whole world seemed to have altered. There was no light in the sky—nothing that might ever happen in the future could suffice to change the actual circumstances which had wrenched Blake and herself apart. Because nothing could undo the past.

A month had elapsed since she had sent him from her, and she had not seen him since. If he had lived more or less a hermit's life before they first came to know each other, his aloofness from the world was now doubly accentuated. He shut himself up in Boscowen, and was never seen outside the place. Not even Judy—brimming over with a sympathetic longing to help and heal—could induce him to forego his solitude. And in the one short interview he had accorded David—who had literally forced an entrance into the lonely, fir-girdled house, declining to be shoo'd away by the formidable Kezia—he had very definitely refused to deviate from the lines he had laid down for himself.

"I'm better alone," he said. "I ought to have known that a man can never escape his past. It always overtakes him somewhere. I shall do now what I meant doing before you crocked up at Le Geyt, and dragged me back into a world that has no place for me"—with a bitter smile.

"And that is?"

"Sell Boscowen, as soon as I can find a purchaser, and clear out of England."

David shook his head. His eyes were sad.

"Lord!" he commented. "What a mess men and women

do make of their lives, when there's no need for it if only they'd apply a little tolerance and common sense."

"'If only'!" There was a jeering note in Blake's voice. "'If only' we were all saints instead of sinners! You might just as reasonably expect the one as the other, my dear David."

"And Pam? Have you thought of her?"

A swift look of intense pain flashed into Blake's eyes, to be instantly repressed.

"I *am* thinking of Pam. The sooner I get out—leave the coast clear—the sooner she'll get over it."

Again David shook his head.

"You've been many kinds of a fool, Blake, but surely you're not fool enough to imagine for one moment that Pam is the kind of woman to 'get over' a thing of this sort?"

"She will," answered Carrington quietly. "It's hurting her now, I know. But don't you see, in course of time she'll come to think of me chiefly as the man who caused her brother's death—and she'll grow to hate me accordingly. And when that time comes, there'll be room in her life for some other man—who'll be able to make her happy."

David said no more. He had the wisdom to recognize that he could do nothing with Blake in his present frame of mind, and, knowing the man's iron determination, he felt quite sure that he would carry out his expressed intention of putting himself once and for all outside Pam's life, no matter what it might cost him. The whole unravelling of the tangle—if such a tangle could ever be unravelled—lay in Pam's hands, rested upon whether or no she had the insight and courage and fineness to put love first and foremost of everything—above the natural and inevitable recoil she must experience towards Blake, even above the feeling that it was only morally due to Miles to cut herself off from the man who had been responsible for his death. And if Pam were ever to rise to these heights, David knew

she must have time—time to accustom her mind to the circumstances attending Miles' death and to envisage them in their true perspective and relation to right and wrong, time in which to recover her sense of proportion and to realize, not only her own suffering, but Blake's. So he stood by and waited, silent and passive—which is the hardest but sometimes the best and only service we can render to a friend.

Meanwhile June had slipped into July and the glory of summer filled the world with sunshine and flowers and canopied it with skies that were almost as blue as the southern skies of France. The sheer beauty and glowing life of it all seemed to Pam to make her own pain even harder to bear than if the bleakness of winter had hemmed her round. The usual progression of summer amusements—picnics, bathing parties, tennis—was in full swing, and she found that the general fun and gaiety prevailing at such times jarred painfully upon raw-edged nerves, striking a violently discordant note in the midst of the utter weariness and hopelessness of her own personal outlook.

She had never dreamed, when she sent Blake away from her, what the cost would be—in daily, hourly longing for his presence, for the touch of his hand, the sound of his voice. It was a torment unspeakable, an aching need that hurt until she wondered how it was possible to be hurt so much and yet to go on living—dressing, eating, talking, taking her part in the ordinary routine of the days' work. Sometimes she stared at herself consideringly in the glass and wondered why she looked so little altered. True, the contours of her face had sharpened a trifle, and dark shadows lay not infrequently beneath her eyes. But there was no visible alteration commensurate with the bewildering pain which tortured her.

Moreover, there was little to distract her thoughts. Had she been a woman with a profession of her own, she might have sought an anodyne in her work, and so found

some respite from the procession of sad thoughts and memories that haunted her. But definite work, that great panacea for pain, was denied her. She busied herself more than usual over household matters and endeavoured to interest herself in the improvements which Toby was still gradually making to the property, and during these weeks she and he both learned to know and understand one another in a way which had not hitherto been possible between them. Only once had he spoken to her of Blake, and when she had told him all that there was to tell he had nodded comprehendingly and said: "I see what you mean, old girl, and while you feel like that about it you can't do anything else than what you have done. But remember this, if ever you feel differently, I should understand—and I think Miles would understand, too," he added quietly.

Those last words lingered in Pam's mind. She was growing to think a good deal of Toby's opinion, and more than once she had been struck by the concise and clearcut views he held in relation to certain subjects, views which showed that Toby—whom she had once considered rather a slacker and disposed to let things sort themselves, as it were—now thought matters over carefully, sifted and weighed the pros and cons, and finally took a very definite and unmistakable stand. He was developing on rather unexpected lines, and actually it was to Blake Carrington's influence that the stronger grip which he was taking upon life was traceable.

This new facet of his character was particularly evident in regard to the engagement between Bubbles and Madame de Brécourt. He had called upon the latter one day, at Bubbles' request, and upon his return he had had a brief interview with his brother.

"You're making a hell of a mistake, Bubbles," he told him candidly, "the biggest mistake of your life."

Bubbles' proud young head went up in the air at once.

"Do you mind explaining yourself?" he asked loftily.

"Not in the least." Toby never lost his lazy amiability. "I mean just what I say. Madame de Brécourt is no good to you, and I'm afraid I can't welcome her into the family as a future sister-in-law."

"The devil you can't!" burst out Bubbles, his eyes stormy. "Then we'll do without your welcome. I've no doubt we shall survive," he added scathingly.

"I've no doubt you would," returned Toby placidly. "But I'd prefer to think you'll come to your senses. A man shouldn't marry his grandmother. Madame de Brécourt is literally a good many years older than you are—and about a hundred years older in experience."

Bubbles fumed ineffectually, winding up with a defiant:

"Well, thank goodness, I'm independent, and I can jolly well marry whoever I choose."

"Of course you can. But remember, you can't bring her here—to Rakehill—without my permission."

"Do you mean that?"

For once Toby's habitual placidity deserted him.

"Yes," he relied sternly. "I do mean that. Pam is not going to receive a woman like Madame de Brécourt now —or ever."

"If she were my wife——" began Bubbles.

"That remark applies precisely the same whether she becomes your wife or not," returned Toby decisively.

Bubbles took himself off in a fury. Never before had his own and his brother's wills come into direct conflict over anything that really mattered, and Toby's opposition aroused all his obstinacy.

Latterly he had been beginning to find Yvonne's fervent love-making pall a trifle. With the assurance of her actual engagement to him, too, the Frenchwoman had become more exacting, and on several occasions had treated him to scenes of passionate temper which had irritated him just as the sudden application of the curb irritates a high-mettled horse, and he had come back to Rakehill to find

something extraordinarily restful and refreshing in Sheila's presence there. Then, after the latter's return to Trethry, he experienced an odd, inexplicable sense of loss which he hardly understood, and which Yvonne, even in her most charming moods, was unable to counteract. Altogether, poor Bubbles, torn between two women who charmed him, was in a very unhappy frame of mind, and temporarily Toby's rather unwise opposition rekindled his somewhat waning enthusiasm for Yvonne. He felt that it was up to him to protect her from what he luridly described in his own mind as "frightfully unjust persecution," and Yvonne, divining the trend of his thoughts, made the utmost use of his rebellious mood.

"Let us get married ver' soon, my Bubbles," she suggested. "I am sure, then, that your brother will come round and be friendly."

Bubbles was conscious of an odd little sense of shock. Marriage! Marriage was such a binding, permanent sort of thing, and when Yvonne proposed an early wedding, to his own inward astonishment he found himself curiously averse from the idea. He temporized, therefore, pointing out that it would be better to overcome Toby's objections before marriage than after. Then he went out and walked for miles along the coast, and meeting Sheila on his way back, looking particularly winsome, wondered desperately whether if it had been a question of his marriage with her he would have felt the same sudden distaste for matrimony.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHAT DAVID THOUGHT

LUCIAN GALE, watching matters with an insight born of his own recent experience of love and of a certain special knowledge he chanced to have acquired concerning Yvonne, understood very well when Pam confided in him her renewed anxiety over Bubbles—for not even her own overwhelming trouble could leave her apathetic towards anything that threatened Bubbles' happiness.

"It's a tangle, I admit," said Loo. "I happen to know a good deal about Yvonne de Brécourt—and what I know isn't precisely to her credit."

"*You* know about her? How do you know anything?"

"Oh, a year or so ago she caught a young pal of mine in her toils—a boy of twenty. A friend of his—a much older man—managed to get him free of her, but he'll carry a scar on his wrist by way of a memento for the rest of his life."

"Scar—on his wrist?" Pam's thoughts flashed back to the conversation she had overheard between the two men at the casino at Le Geyt, and linked it up with the story Loo was telling her.

"Yes. Yvonne played a very useful stunt. Got poor old Jack—my pal—to come and see her one evening, kept him late, and then swore he'd endangered her reputation. De Brécourt's reputation, by Jove!" He laughed contemp-

tuously. "And, of course, she tried to make him marry her. He'd pots of money—that goes without saying."

"But, surely"—Pam looked puzzled—"surely she's not so badly off? The Château Fleuri was a lovely place——"

"It was only lent her—though I hear she swanked that it was her own."

"So that's why she's trying to capture Bubbles!"

Loo nodded cynically.

"Failing bigger game," he said. "And poor old Bubbles doesn't quite know where his heart is. If he were a few years older, he'd find out pretty quick. But, as it is, that confounded Frenchwoman throws dust in his eyes whenever they begin to open a bit. What he wants is some big shock to wake him up, the young fool!" he added savagely. "I hope he may get it in time."

Some big shock! Pam winced. She had had hers, and the awakening had been bitter. Loo, sensing that sudden shrinking and rightly attributing it, looked down at her compassionately.

"Ah, my dear, not the sort of shock you've had," he said quickly. "You didn't need that to show you where your heart lay."

She shook her head silently.

"Pam." Because he loved her, Loo dared to break through the guard of reticence which she had built up round her during the last few weeks. "Pam, I know I'm going to hurt you horribly, but I'd do even that to help you back to happiness. You're being a coward."

Her slight frame tautened at the word as though he had flicked her with a lash.

"A coward?"

"Yes"—steadily. "Just because love has asked a lot more of you than it does of most people—asked you to forgive something big to the man who loves you—you've run away from it."

"That's not fair, Loo," she protested swiftly. "It isn't just forgiving him 'something he's done.' "

"No. It's for giving him something he's done *which effects you*—that's what you can't forgive. If it had been another woman's brother who had died, you could have forgiven it. But because it was yours—you can't. And that's pure selfish cowardice on your part."

Pam drew a quick breath and got up hastily.

"It may be what you say, Loo," she said in a cold little voice that masked an inward passion of conflicting emotion. "But, anyhow, there it is. And I don't think I want to discuss it, thanks."

She went away, leaving Loo looking after her with regretful eyes.

"Oh, damn!" he muttered. "That's what you get for interfering. I've done no earthly good—and only made her rather hate me."

But, little as we realize it, those bitter and hard sounding speeches which are on occasion forced out of us by some inner, red-hot impulse to set a friend on the right path not infrequently bear ultimate fruit, in spite of the resentful welcome they are usually accorded.

Against her will, Loo's challenge lingered in Pam's mind. *Was* she a coward? Selfish? After all, all cowardice takes its root in selfishness. The ice which had closed over her heart—leaving her numbly acquiescent and unquestioning—had been broken by that pickaxe blow which Loo had dealt her, and now she was beginning to ask herself if she had been right or wrong in what she had done. Up till the moment Loo had spoken she had been quite sure she was right. Now a sense of doubt was troubling her—of unsureness. So that when David, who had been patiently waiting and watching, for his opportunity, approached her on the subject, the ground had been in a measure prepared.

It was one blazing hot afternoon towards the end of July, when Pam had been lunching at Trethry, that David

proposed a stroll in what was called the lower garden—a charming, partially walled garden sheltered by the rising slope of a grassy mound, with a sunken lawn and a flagged path running round it, parallel to a herbaceous border of old-fashioned English flowers. Tall blue delphiniums gleamed from the border, and multi-coloured hollyhocks, while between them golden sunflowers lit their discs of gorgeous orange.

"Carrington has had an offer for Boscowen," said David, suddenly and without preamble, as he and Pam seated themselves on an old stone bench tucked away beneath the shade of a high yew hedge.

For a moment Pam felt her heart stand still. Then it raced in her side, and it was with difficulty she could steady her breath to answer.

"An offer?" she repeated at last, slowly. "What kind—of an offer?"

David did not look at her, but let his eyes rest thoughtfully on the green shaven turf of the sun lawn.

"An offer from a man who wants to buy the farm. You know the place has been up for sale ever since"—he paused, then added deliberately—"you threw Blake over."

Pam was silent for a moment. Then she said quietly:

"I don't think you need have said that, David."

"It's the truth."

"In a way—yes, it is the truth. But you know why I did it."

"Because in a way—unintentionally—he was responsible for someone's death?"

She nodded voicelessly.

"And yet," he said slowly, "I remember one day at Le Geyt—that day we drove towards the Estérels and picnicked, do you remember?—you told me that, because you cared, you would never shrink from him on that account."

"Yes. I know I told you that."

David went on remorselessly. Having once picked up the surgeon's knife, he did not propose to lay it down again until the wound which was festering in Pam's heart, poisoning the very springs of life for her, was laid open.

"And you also told me," he continued, "that you didn't believe that a man should pay—endlessly—for any mistake that he might have committed. Yet, now, you are making Blake pay—to the uttermost farthing."

"But I didn't know, then, that it was Miles—Miles who had died because of him!" she answered a little wildly. "If I'd known——"

"You'd have qualified your forgiveness," said David cuttingly. "Set a limit to it."

A quiver ran through her. Her hand beat restlessly on the stone bench.

"How could I help it?" she said very low. "You know how I loved Miles."

David laid his hand over the restless one beside him.

"Yes, my dear," he answered. "I do know. But does your love for Miles make what Blake did any the worse—any more heinous?"

"Yes, I think it does."

"That's impossible. It makes it more dreadful *for you,* but his mistake, sin—call it what you will—is intrinsically the same, whether it was your brother or another woman's who died in consequence."

David had uttered the same thought—the same judgment—as Loo, and in almost the same words. Did it appear like that to all men, then, to everyone except herself? To her, the one thing which made all the difference was the fact that it was Miles who had been killed—Miles, and not another.

"Surely you must see that, Pam?" pursued David. "You could—and did—forgive Blake that frightful mistake of six years ago—wiped it out, as far as you were concerned. You thought him still worthy of your love, in spite of the

past. . . . And the fact that it was Miles who paid for that mistake makes no earthly difference—no real difference, only a sentimental one. If Blake's fault was forgivable then, when you didn't know who had suffered for it, it is forgivable now that you do. And if you refuse to forgive it, you're committing an act of the most flagrant injustice." Pam drew her breath in sharply, protestingly, but David continued unyieldingly. "Inconceivable injustice. Right and wrong are not changed because it was Dick, or Tom, *or Miles* who suffered. My dear, you've got to look this thing squarely in the face—not just from your own individual angle. Either Blake's action was forgivable—or unforgivable. Which was it?"

She made a little wild gesture which held almost the desperation of a trapped forest creature.

"I don't know—oh, I don't know!" she said piteously.

"But you did know," persisted David. "You had no doubt at all—until the personal equation came into the matter. And because of that, because the death for which Blake was responsible had hurt *you*—instead of some other woman—you're prepared to punish him as long as he lives. And to punish yourself too—to throw away the whole beauty and value and meaning of love. *Because you've been hurt,* remember—not because Blake has been guilty of anything beyond what you already knew and had forgiven."

"Because you've been hurt"—the shaft went home. Actually, denuded of the wrappings with which she had enshrouded her decision—those wrappings, first of a natural sense of personal loss and recoil, then of a commonplace and small-minded way of envisaging the entire matter—that phrase crystallized the whole selfish truth of her attitude. "Because you have been hurt." It was only after a long silence that she spoke again.

"What do you want me to do?" she said in a low voice.

"To do?" David answered her with extreme gentleness. "Oh, my dear, I want you to do just what the love in your

heart tells you to do. If you saw Blake now—saw him as I have seen him—you would realize what you are making him suffer. I know you've suffered, too, in the loss of Miles. But can any pain you inflict on Blake undo that suffering? You know it can't. . . . It was big and fine of you to forgive, to set aside the fact that Blake had killed a fellow-man. It will be still bigger and finer if you can forgive the fact that your brother was the man whose death he caused. There'll be plenty of people who'll be horribly shocked and say, 'How could she marry the man who killed her brother?' If you ever take Blake back, you'll have to be prepared for that—for that and lots of other pin-pricks—sword-thrusts, if you will"—as he glimpsed her expression. "But to me there seem only two things to consider. One is the fact that intrinsically Blake is not more guilty now than when you promised to marry him—so that, from the point of view of pure justice, you had no right to rescind that promise. The other is"—he paused, and his eyes searched her face—"just how much does love mean to you—love, and the happiness of the man you say you love?"

"*Say* I love?" The words flashed out from her. He had touched her on the raw. But he did not flinch.

"Yes," he answered sternly. "*Say* you love. Remember, love doesn't limit or qualify, forgiving thus far and no farther. Love, if it's the real thing—forgives everything, even the hurt to itself."

CHAPTER XXX

AWAKENING

THE accident happened with that breath-taking suddenness wherewith fate so often delivers a blow which is destined to make or mar the lives of those immediately concerned. Riding negligently along the lanes together, Pam and Bubbles, who had been sitting at ease in their saddles, lulled into a state of pleasant lethargy by the drowsy warmth of the afternoon and the even beat of dawdling hoofs, were all at once jerked into swift and agonized attention.

A short distance ahead of them the road curved and rose to a sharp incline, and down this hill streaked a girl on a bicycle, approaching them at a speed which, in view of the steepness of the gradient and the bad surface of the roadway, was simply inviting catastrophe.

"Good God! The girl's mad!" exclaimed Bubbles. "She'll never take the curve at that pace!"

Instinctively he and Pam pulled their horses to one side of the road in order to give the reckless cyclist all the space available, and in the same instant recognition came to them.

"It's Sheila!" The words tore themselves from Bubble's throat, hoarse and ragged with quick fear.

And at the same time Pam realized what had happened. "She's lost control!"

Followed one terrible moment, that moment which seems

as though it stretched into eternity, when those who are watching can see the approach of inevitable disaster and yet are utterly and entirely powerless to avert it.

Clinging to the handlebars of her machine, Sheila flashed towards them, the cycle rocking as she came. She made a valiant, futile attempt to negotiate the curve, then shot forward towards the hedge, crashed into it at a slant, and the next moment her slight young body was hurled through the air and fell with a dull thud in the roadway. . . .

"I believe she's dead."

Bubbles, kneeling on the ground beside the still figure that lay there, spoke in a perfectly blank, expressionless voice. The eyes he lifted to Pam's face held a stunned look.

"Not dead, Bubbles," she said swiftly. "I'm sure she's not dead. Wait a moment." Swiftly she led the horses to a gateway at the side of the road and tethered them. Then she hastened back to where Sheila lay, and, kneeling beside her, thrust an anxious, searching hand beneath the girl's jumper to feel if her heart were still beating.

"She's not dead, Bubbles—only stunned," she said, in her voice an infinite relief.

"You sure?" asked Bubbles tensely. And Pam, realizing the agony of suspense which had momentarily wiped all the youth out of his face, leaving it grey and old-looking, answered firmly:

"Quite sure. She's been knocked senseless, and I'm rather afraid she's broken her arm. But she's alive, and we must get help."

Bubbles sprang up, throwing a hasty glance round him as he calculated distances.

"Boscowen's not a quarter of a mile away. I'll ride there. Thank heaven, Blake knows something about doctoring. You stay here."

Without waiting for her answer, he untethered one of the horses and, flinging himself into the saddle, set off at

a headlong gallop in the direction of Boscowen Farm, leaving Pam to the breathless consciousness that in a very short space of time she and Blake would be face to face.

The thought shook her. Her heart beat unevenly and she felt her limbs trembling with a strange terror of the impending meeting. She would have liked to mount her horse and ride away—anywhere where there could be no possibility of encountering Blake. The memory of David's words dinned in her ears: "If you had seen him as I have seen him." And now, in a few minutes she would see him, and know, as David knew, what these last months had cost him. Involuntarily her shaking hands went up to her face as though to shut out the sight. Then a little, almost voiceless moan from the still figure beside her brought her back to the needs of the moment.

A tiny trickle of water threaded its way through the hedge-trough, overflow from some rivulet which even the heat of summer had failed to dry up. She ran to it, and, soaking her handkerchief, laid it on Sheila's forehead and began chafing the girl's hands. Again and again she wetted the handkerchief, and at last, to her immense relief, Sheila opened her eyes and stared at her confusedly.

"Where am I?" she murmured faintly.

"You fell off your bike," said Pam, with promptitude. She had once been knocked senseless herself and knew the irritation caused to a dazed mind, groping its way back to consciousness, when those first puzzled questionings are left unanswered. "You were coming down a hill and couldn't turn the corner at the foot of it, so you ran into the bank."

The intelligence began to come back into Sheila's eyes.

"The brakes wouldn't act," she said feebly. "Ah!" A sudden cry of pain broke from her as she attempted to raise herself. "My arm!"

"Yes. Your arm's hurt a bit, I think," said Pam gently. "But don't worry. Just lie still a few minutes, and then Blake will be here. Don't try to move."

But there was little further likelihood of Sheila's moving. The pain which had shot through her arm at her last attempt had sent her back into semi-consciousness, and there was nothing more that Pam could do except to wait beside her till help came. The waiting seemed long, but at last she caught the hum of an approaching motor, and a minute later a car came into view, with Carrington at the wheel and Bubbles sitting, white-faced, beside him.

It came to a standstill, and with an immense effort Pam lifted her eyes to Blake's face. The alteration in it made her throat contract. It was haggard, as a man's face might be who has endured a long strain without breaking, with lines deeply scored on either side the mouth, while his eyes held a concentrated bitterness that hurt her to look at. And it was she, she alone, who was responsible for all this!

"If you had seen him as I have seen him," David had said, "you would realize what you are making him suffer." She realized it now. That one swift glance at the beloved face had made her understand as no words uttered by another man, not even David, could ever do. She knew now that she had been wrong, utterly wrong, in sending him from her; it had been the denial of love and of that divine altruism which is the very core and essence of love. He had been hurt, bitterly and irretrievably hurt by life and the terrible aftermath of a boyish folly, and she, to whom it had been given to heal, had doubled, trebled what he had to bear. In that moment of agonized realization, her resolve was taken. She would go to Blake and tell him that henceforth no shadow from the past should keep them apart—go back to him, and take with her that healing of which he stood in such sore need.

". . . Yes, the arm's broken." These words were the first to pierce Pam's consciousness and bring her back from the place of revelation whither, for a brief, quickening moment, her spirit had been caught up. Blake was on his

knees beside Sheila, methodically examining into her injuries with deft, understanding hands.

"We'll get her back to Boscowen," he went on, "and I'll set this arm. Then send for Judy—Sheila will have to stay the night at my place."

Quietly, with an assured efficiency that lifted the whole weight of responsibility and suspense from Pam's shoulders, Blake took command. After that, it seemed to her, things moved like clockwork. The broken arm duly safeguarded, Sheila was placed in the car, where Bubbles steadied the impromptu stretched on which she lay while Blake drove carefully back to Boscowen, Pamela following on horseback, and in a very short space of time everything that should be done was accomplished—Sheila, her arm newly set, lying in bed, with Blake and Kezia in attendance, while Bubbles rode towards Trethry in search of Judy.

Pam sat alone in the living-room downstairs, waiting for the latter's arrival. She glanced about her with a queer, heart-shaking sense of reminiscence, recalling the day she had first come there, her arm cut by the blow Blake had inadvertently dealt her. There was the same gate-legged table, the same oak dresser, its shining darkness emphasized by the reds and yellows of the pottery which lodged on its shelves, even the same stool on which Blake had placed the bowl of water from which she had reluctantly permitted him to bathe her injured arm. It all looked so familiar—and yet extraordinarily strange and unfamiliar. Such a lifetime of events—of happiness and pain—seemed to have been crowded into the months which had elapsed between then and now. Everything had changed so incalculably during that time, she herself, and Blake—Blake most of all. A little shudder shook her at the recollection of his altered face. And then, looking up at some slight sound attracted her attention, she saw him standing just within the doorway, staring at her with haggard eyes in which the hunger born of months of separation had leapt into life.

"Blake!" It was hardly more than a little cry, as she rose and went to him with outstretched hands. "Oh, my dear——"

He took her hands and held them in his, while his eyes raked her face hungrily, as though he were trying to reassure himself that all the lineaments he had loved and remembered were still the same—unchanged.

"You're thinner," he said at last, abruptly.

"Am I?" She gave a little unsteady laugh. "I—I wonder I'm not dead. Oh, Blake, my dear, I've been a fool—such a fool!" She paused, then went on rapidly: "But it wasn't because I didn't love you. It was just that I didn't—understand. Will you—won't you forgive me, Blake?"

"For give—*you?*" he said, in tones of amazement. "But it was you who couldn't forgive me!"

"I know. I've told you—I didn't understand. I was so hurt and shocked that I felt I *couldn't* be your wife. But now—Blake, do you still want me?"

"Do I—— Oh, but what's the good of talking? You told me you could never forget what I'd done. These last months haven't altered that."

"No. But they've altered me. What you did—doesn't stand between us any longer, Blake."

His grasp tightened on her hands.

"Do you mean that?" he said hoarsely. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"Yes," she answered, and now her voice was very sure and steady. "I know. And I mean just that. I'm ready to be your wife—if you still want me."

In the brief pause which followed, it seemed as though he was about to snatch her up into his arms. Then, suddenly, with a violent movement he almost pushed her from him and stepped back from her.

"No," he said. "No, we can't marry now, you and I. You think you could do it——"

"I know I could," she interposed.

"You think you could," he repeated inexorably. "You think you could forget—wipe out all recollection of the past. But you couldn't. Don't think I don't realize all your sweetness"—his voice deepened—"your unutterable goodness in coming to me like this. . . . I do. But I'll not take it from you. I can't."

"Then you don't believe me," she said slowly. "You don't—trust me, Blake."

"God knows I do! I believe in you absolutely—your intention, your will to forget. But don't you see—oh, my dear, you must see that, actually, nothing is altered. We stand just where we were—with Miles' death between us. And though you might try your utmost, the memory of it would come back, and back again. . . . Do you recollect what you once said: *'I should remember, quite suddenly, just when we were most happy together—that it was you who had killed Miles.'* And it was the truth. The memory of it would come back to you—whether you wanted it or not—and damn our happiness."

He turned away and, leaning his arm on the chimney-piece, shaded his eyes with his hand. She could see only his mouth, set in a grim line of indomitable decision. In the stern closing of those lips she could read the empty future stretching bleakly ahead.

"Then—I'm to go away?" she said helplessly.

He dropped his hand from his face and for a moment his eyes met hers, their expression curiously blank and impenetrable.

"Yes," he said. "You must go away." For an instant something flared suddenly behind that impenetrability. "And for God's sake, keep away! There's a limit to what a man can bear."

She made one last appeal.

"*Must* you bear it—Blake?"

A slight shudder ran through him, but he remained

standing where he was—with three feet of space and the whole world between them.

"Yes," he said. "As I told you once before, my life is finished—blacked out. And you can't kindle a flame from dead ashes."

CHAPTER XXXI

PLAYING THE GAME

THE lights and shadows pursued each other slowly across the shaven lawn at Trethry as the sun dropped westward. It had been a blazingly hot day, but now a little fugitive breeze had sprung up from nowhere in particular, dissipating the stifling heat of the afternoon, and Sheila and Bubbles, tempted by the refreshing coolness, had established themselves comfortably beneath the shade of a huge cedar.

"I've been a fool—an unutterable fool."

Bubbles spoke with a note of gloomy conviction in his voice. Sheila, still looking pale and shaken as the result of her accident and with her arm in splints, smiled down at him where he sat on the grass beside her *chaise longue,* his hands clasped round his knees and a cigarette between his lips.

"It's never too late to mend," she observed, a tiny smile of amusement curving her lips.

"Do you believe that?" asked Bubbles abruptly.

She nodded.

"Of course. Don't you?"

"But I've been such a blatant idiot," he returned, with a new and rare humility.

"Couldn't you explain a little—instead of just calling yourself names?" suggested Sheila.

Bubbles unclasped his hands, flung away the stump of his cigarette, and sat up very straight.

"Yes," he said. "I'll explain—if any explanation's necessary. I've been making the same mistake a lot of fellows do—mistaking common metal for pure gold. I thought what I felt for Yvonne was the real thing—I was sure of it—and that you and I were merely pals. And then—then you went and tumbled off that bicycle of yours——" He stopped abruptly as though the recollection of it choked his speech.

"Yes?" It was hardly more than the merest murmur. "And then?"

"Why, then I knew. When I saw you lying in the road, as white as a sheet of paper, and so still—so *horribly* still—I knew that it was only you that mattered in the whole world. Oh, Sheila—darling——" He knelt up suddenly against the *chaise longue,* his eager boyish face close to hers. "Darling, say it's not too late—say you love me, Sheila——"

And then, somehow, words were no longer necessary. Bubbles' strong young arms went round her—infinitely tenderly, so as not to hurt the injured arm—and his lips on hers told her all that she needed to know.

It was some time before they came back to the consideration of things mundane. When they did, it was to face the fact of Bubbles' promise to Yvonne.

"And I said I'd marry her—marry that woman!" A note of puzzled amazement vibrated in his voice. "Sheila, I must have been mad—stark mad!"

There is no glamour so misleading as the glamour of love's simulacrum, nor any that so swiftly, suddenly dies, leaving behind it no least redeeming touch of memory or illusion. With eyes from which the scales had fallen, Bubbles saw Yvonne de Brécourt for the woman that she actually was—and his inner amazement at his own former blindness was almost ludicrous.

"She's very beautiful," murmured Sheila. Femininely, now that she had nothing to fear from the other woman's beauty, she admitted it freely and frankly.

"Beautiful?" returned Bubbles, rather scornfully. "Well, yes, I suppose she is. But what's mere beauty?"

Sheila laughed a little, remembering how "mere beauty" had nearly succeeded in stealing her happiness away.

"Oh, Bubbles, you are a kid! I suppose"—with a sudden flash of woman's insight—"most men are."

"I'm your lord and master, madam—or, at least, I'm going to be," returned Bubbles masterfully. "I'd have you remember that."

Followed a brief interlude—of the kind peculiar to newly engaged couples—and then Sheila asked practically:

"What are you going to do about Madame de Brécourt? You'd better"—with a smile—"be off with the old love before you're on with the new, you know. No one must know about—about us until you've told her, Bubbles."

"I shall write to her—to-day," he replied decisively.

It was easily said, but when, after dinner, in the solitude of his own room, Bubbles essayed the composition of the said letter, he found it a much more complicated task than he had anticipated. It is very difficult to explain to a woman whom you have led to believe herself all the sun and moon and stars in your particular firmament that for some unlooked-for reason she has suddenly dropped completely out of the sky, and when, at two in the morning, Bubbles folded and sealed the final result of several hours' hard thinking, the floor was littered with the half-written sheets of futile endeavour.

He gathered them up, tore them into small pieces, and a few minutes later tumbled into bed, dog-tired, to sleep until the breakfast-gong at Rakehill reverberated through the house.

It was a day or two before he received a reply to his letter. He had wondered whether Yvonne would leave it

unanswered, or perhaps send him merely a brief line of scornful release. She did neither. The letter she did send was a very clever one—giving him his liberty, and investing it with a gentle, tender reminiscence and reproach, while through it all ran a little note of suppressed pathos. It was the kind of letter to make any man feel that he had behaved rather like a brute and wish that in some way or other he could soften things for the woman he had been compelled to hurt and who was making such a plucky attempt to stand up against the blow.

"It was a little cowardly—wasn't it, Bubbles?"—ran the letter—"to write it all to me? I think I should have found it easier to bear—and to understand—if you had come to me and told me. It didn't seem quite like you to hide behind a letter. But you are free—oh, quite free. . . . I ask only one little thing. Will you come and see me again—just once, to say goodbye? . . . Perhaps you will answer 'no' to this. In your newfound wisdom and caution you may think it indiscreet. I remember you have an English saying that discretion is the better part of valour. If, however, it isn't like this with you, come to the Bungalow to-morrow night, at about nine o'clock, and have coffee with me."

Bubbles' fierce young boyish honour flared up. Every word of the letter flicked him on the raw, as it was intended to, and his earliest impetuous impulse was to accept Yvonne's invitation and clear himself of that veiled charge of cowardice. Loyalty to Sheila, however, took him first to Trethry, to consult with her before yielding to it.

Had Sheila been an older and more experienced woman, she might have read between the lines of Madame de Brécourt's letter and counselled Bubbles differently. But she was young and warm-hearted, and a rush of sympathy for the other woman—the woman who had lost all that she herself had gained—coloured her answer.

"Yes, I think you ought to go, Bubbles. It's—it's hate-

ful for her, you know. I know if I were she, I'd like to see you—to say good-bye." Her voice quivered a little. "A letter's such a cold, mechanical kind of thing, and you can see it's hurt her more than—than she need have been hurt."

Bubbles stared moodily in front of him, his blue eyes clouded.

"Go, Bubbles," urged Sheila softly. She felt very compassionate towards that other woman at the moment.

He turned towards her, cupping her small round chin in his hand.

"You don't mind if I go?"

She shook her head, smiling a little.

"No. I don't mind. I want you to. I think it's only playing the game."

"Very well, then. I'll go."

CHAPTER XXXII

AT THE BUNGALOW

P-R-R-R! The telephone bell pealed shrilly, and Lucian Gale, smoking a final pipe before he turned in for the night, jumped up rather hurriedly and took down the receiver. Midnight had already struck, and it was rare for anyone to ring up at that hour of the night.

"Hullo! Who's speaking?" he demanded curiously.

A faint, rather agitated voice came back over the wire—Pam's voice. Her utterance came in little nervous jerks, so that it was difficult to hear her.

"Will I come over to Rakehill, did you say?" he asked.

"Yes—yes. Every one's out except me, and—and I'm rather worried about something. Will you come? Do you mind?"

"Of course I don't mind," he replied promptly. "I'll ride over at once."

He hung up the receiver and made his way out to the stables. It was very quiet there—only the occasional stamping of a hoof broke the silence. The long shadows of the pointed gables lay blackly across the moonlit stable-yard.

Quickly saddling and bridling a little thoroughbred mare whose pace was her great point, he rode out into the night, taking a short cut across the fields and sending the mare along as fast as she could travel. Soon he had crossed the borders of Rakehill, and presently, flickering intermittently

between the leafy branches of the trees, he caught glimpses of the lights from one of the windows of the house, gleaming warmly orange against the cool, clear moonlight which bathed the night. A few minutes later, as he clattered up the drive, the front door opened and Pam herself came hurriedly out on to the steps.

"Put the mare up in the end stall, Loo," she said. "It's empty. And then come in."

There was an odd note in her voice—a note of strain, and with a hasty nod Lucian rode round to the stables, returning to the house as quickly as he could. Something in Pam's manner conveyed a sense of urgency.

"Now, what is it?" he asked, as he followed her into the sitting-room. "What's worrying you, Pam?"

"Toby's had to run up to London for a day or two, on business," she said, speaking rather carefully and as though she were endeavouring to be particularly controlled. "Otherwise I shouldn't have bothered you, Loo."

"Bothered me?" He swept the tentative apology aside. "You know nothing's any bother that I do for you. The point is, what's the trouble? What can I do?"

He took her hand, and, feeling that she was trembling a little, pushed her down into a chair.

"My dear girl, tell me what's the matter. You're all to pieces over it—whatever it is."

"It's Bubbles—about Bubbles," she said, her breath coming unevenly. "He went away—oh, hours ago—to the Bungalow, to see that woman, and he's never returned. He said he should be back again quite soon. I've been waiting—waiting—— And he's never come. Loo"—she caught him by the arm and he could feel the nervously tense grip of her fingers—"Loo, I'm frightened!"

"But, my dear, there's nothing to be frightened about," he said soothingly. "Probably Madame de Brécourt's made herself unusually fascinating, and Bubbles has stayed longer than he meant to."

"No, no, it's not that." She shook her head vehemently. "You don't understand. It's all off between them——"

"All off?"

"Yes. Bubbles told me only to-day. And I'm so glad —so thankful! . . . If only he's safe!"

Quickly, with little nervous halts between her phrases, she told him all that Bubbles had confessed to her—how he had discovered that he cared for Sheila, and that he was going to the Bungalow, at Yvonne's request, to take a final farewell of her that very evening. "I shall be back by ten or half-past," he had assured her cheerfully, as he went off. "And then, thank God, I shall be a free man."

"And now—now it's nearly half-past twelve," wound up Pam. "And I'm horribly frightened, Loo. I suspect that woman—you know what you told me about that friend of yours, and the man she slashed across the wrist. If anything happens to Bubbles——"

"Nothing will," said Loo firmly. He could see that Pam's imagination had been running riot during the long hours of waiting. Alone, with the minutes ticking slowly by and seeming double their usual length, and with that fear at the back of her mind lest harm should befall her beloved Bubbles, she had worked herself up into a state of absolute panic. Normally, Pam's nerve was not easily upset, but the long months of strain through which she had recently passed, when anxiety concerning Bubbles' welfare had been added to the burden of her own unhappiness, had used up her reserve force. And when that happens to anyone, it sometimes requires only a very little thing to break down their self-control.

In a flash Loo realized all that she had been enduring while she waited vainly for Bubbles' return.

"Look here," he said reassuringly. "Don't worry any more, Pam, old thing. I'll ride straight over to the Bungalow myself——"

Pam sprang up.

"Will you? Will you, really?" she exclaimed, a note of intense relief in her voice.

"I'll go right along there now. Probably I shall meet Bubbles coming back. If I don't, I'll go on to the Bungalow itself and rescue him from the clutches of the siren." He spoke jestingly, striving to lessen the tension from which he could see she was suffering, and was rewarded by a faint, rather tremulous smile.

"And now," he went on authoritatively. "I'm going to mix you a stiff brandy-and-soda—and you're going to drink it before I go." He turned towards the sideboard.

"Oh, no," she began protestingly.

"You'll do as you're told," he replied firmly, proceeding to pour out some brandy and splash the soda into it. "Or" —with a half-smile—"I don't go to the Bungalow."

With a faint shrug of her shoulders Pam accepted the glass he held out to her.

"You're a bully, Loo," she said, smiling a little.

He nodded.

"Yes, when it's necessary. And you certainly stood in need of that brandy-and-soda, my dear, to steady you down. Now I'll be off."

She was practically herself again, he could see. It was the loneliness and the forced inaction which had preyed upon her nerves. Now that something definite was going to be done, she was able to get a grip on herself once more.

"Good-bye, then. And no more worrying, mind," he admonished her, as a few minutes later he remounted his horse and rode off down the drive.

But, although he had spoken with assumed cheerfulness, within himself Loo was conscious of a distinct feeling of anxiety. Yvonne was the type of woman who would stop at nothing to gain her ends—and he felt pretty sure she had a very definite end in view in asking Bubbles to come to the Bungalow that night.

"The young fool!" he muttered to himself as he urged

the mare along the road. There was no short cut across the fields to the Bungalow. Suddenly he drew her to one side, as, at a bend in the road, a broad shaft of light, flung by big head-lights, heralded the approach of a car. Came the hoot of a horn, the car rounded the curve, and was abruptly braked to a standstill.

"Hullo, Loo!" It was Blake Carrington's voice which came from behind the steering-wheel, a note of amusement in it. "What the dickens are you doing in this direction? It's my road home, but it certainly isn't yours!"

"No, it's not," admitted Loo grimly. "I'm not going home. You haven't passed Bubbles Wayne on the road, have you? Where've you come from?"

"Beyond Cranruth. Been for a little moonlight drive," explained Blake amicably. He did not add how often his car roared through the desolate country roads by night when nothing but sheer speed and the necessity for concentrating on the driving of the car would set him free for a few hours from the daily torture of his thoughts. "No, I've not seen Bubbles. Why?"

Loo flung himself off his horse and came to the side of the car, and in a few brief words gave Blake the outline of what had happened.

"I'm on my way to the Bungalow now," he said. "That woman is several kinds of devil and Bubbles is a mere innocent. Pam rang me up. She was half wild with anxiety."

Blake listened quietly. Then:

"This is my job, Loo," he said. "I can deal with that woman better than you can, probably. And I guess I can get young Bubbles safe away if there's any trouble. I'll go to the Bungalow." Then, reading Loo's face: "Come with me, if you like. Oh, but your horse——"

Deftly Loo took off the saddle and bridle and thrust them into the back seat of the car.

"The mare'll find her own way home," he said composedly, giving her a slap on her hindquarters which sent

her off down the road at a canter. "She'll be there all right when we get back," he added, stepping into the seat beside Blake.

The latter backed the car to the cross-roads, then turned in, and a minute later they were racing in the opposite direction, headed for the Bungalow.

* * * * *

The passionate, accusing voice ceased, breaking on a strangled sob, and Bubbles sprang up desperately. He had been hours—hours—in that over-perfumed room at the Bungalow, listening, arguing, reasoning, and he and Yvonne were no nearer an understanding than they had been when he came.

She had rung the changes on the whole gamut of emotions, by turns fiercely passionate and demanding or piteously imploring, and at moments hysterically angry. He had never loved her, then, she declared bitterly, if he could part from her so easily—break with her for the sake of a mere chit of a girl who had no idea what love meant. But if he left her, she would not live without him. . . . She would take a quick road out of life, and at least he would know that his happiness with Sheila had been bought at the price of another woman's life. And so on, *da capo,* until Bubbles began to feel as though his brain were reeling.

And now, now she had suddenly flung at him the accusation that he had risked her reputation by his visit tonight.

"Not that that matters to you," she sobbed hysterically. "Nothing matters, I suppose, any longer, that concerns me. I—don't count! I don't suppose you would care, no matter what people said about me."

"But you *asked* me to come!" protested Bubbles in desperation. It had gone on so long, this alternation of recrimination and appeal, that he felt his nerve slipping, as

many a man's nerve has slipped under the incessant lash of a woman's tongue.

"Asked you?" she gave back, her voice rising shrilly. "Of course I asked you! What woman wouldn't? But I never imagined that you meant what you said in your letter—that you would really take back your promise to marry me. . . . You can't, Bubbles—you can't!" She flung her arms round him, clinging to him imploringly.

"I must," he answered, gently but quite definitely releasing himself from her clasp. "Don't you realize, Yvonne, that it would be impossible—useless, now that I know it's Sheila whom I care for? I'm sorry"—awkwardly—"desperately, infernally sorry, but it's no good——"

He stopped, arrested by the expression on her face. She had gone very white, with a grey, pinched look about her mouth, and there was a curious, smouldering light in her eyes—a light that was hardly sane. Silently, like a cat, she slipped from beside him and ran towards an old French bureau. For a moment she stood fumbling at the catch of one of the drawers. Then the drawer slid open and her hand darted inside, to close round something that gleamed grimly, red-edged in the lamplight.

"Bubbles"—her voice sounded harsh and cracked—"if you won't marry me, I'll kill you—*kill* you, do you hear? . . . And myself after!"

Even as she spoke, she was at his side once more, and Bubbles found himself looking straight into the barrel of a revolver. And then—it all happened in a flash—someone brushed past him, someone who had entered through the open French window, forcibly interposing betwixt him and the Frenchwoman. With a dull sense of surprise, Bubbles recognized the man as Carrington. Simultaneously came a loud report—deafeningly loud in the night-stillness of the room, and the next instant Bubbles was aware of Yvonne shrieking hysterically as she retreated across the room, while Blake leaned up against the window-frame,

white-faced, his arm, under its blackened, bullet-ripped sleeve, hanging helplessly at his side.

"Good God! She's shot him!" It was Loo's voice, quick with horror. He had entered the room, following swiftly behind Blake, just in time to catch the latter in his arms as he sank to the ground.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE KINDLED FLAME

"GO in to him, Pam."

Loo spoke with quiet urgency. His hand rested on Pam's shoulder and he gave her a gentle push towards the closed door outside which they were both standing—the door which led directly into the living-room at Boscowen. But for a moment she did not move.

"I wonder if he will understand," she said, her voice quivering a little.

"Understand?" Loo regarded her questioningly, unable to follow her thought. "Understand what?"

"That it's altered everything—his saving Bubbles like that."

"He certainly saved Bubbles' life," replied Loo grimly, "I told you—I saw the whole thing happen. That damned Frenchwoman would have shot him through the head—she couldn't have missed him—if Blake hadn't thrown himself between them."

Pam was silent, mentally envisioning the brief, terrible little scene that had taken place at the Bungalow. Presently she drew a long breath.

"And you, too, Loo, you helped to save Bubbles for me," she said.

"I? I did nothing. Blake did it all—and got a shattered arm for his pains!"

A slight shudder ran through her.

"I know," she said. "I know." Then, after a pause: "Still, in a way, I've you, too, to thank for Bubbles' safety.

But for you, Blake wouldn't even have known he was in any danger. You've both done—so much for me."

She held out her hand and something in the quick, impulsive gesture thanked him more than any mere words. He brushed it with his lips, then watched her go slowly forward and knock on the closed door. A minute later she lifted the latch and the door shut again behind her.

"Pam!"

The utterance of the little name was almost like a cry forced from the man as he stood there, shaken by the unexpectedness of her coming. An instant later he had himself in hand again.

"Why have you come here?" he said coldly. "You had better go away again."

His arm hung in a sling. He looked gaunt and ill, and his eyes held a look of intense weariness. Pam, who had stood hesitating shyly just within the doorway, felt her heart swell with an overpowering rush of compassion for this man of hers whom life had hurt so much.

"No," she said quietly. "I'm not going to be sent away again." She crossed the room to his side. "I've come back to ask you to—to marry me, Blake."

He made a sudden violent gesture.

"We've discussed all that before," he said bitterly. "And you know why I can't. Have you come here just to torture me? If so——"

"You know—you *know* I have not!" she broke in. "I've come—ah, Blake, can't you guess why I've come? Because—because I can't bear life without you any longer, and because there's nothing—now—to keep us apart."

"There's what there has always been," he returned harshly. Then, suddenly, as his eyes met hers, lifted to his with a strangely wistful appeal in them: "Oh, my dear," he said unsteadily, "for God's sake, don't come here and tempt me! I know, and you know, what stands between us

—a memory that you yourself have said would come back, even when we were most happy."

"No." She shook her head. "That memory will never come back again to stand between us. It has been wiped out—for ever."

"Wiped out?"

"Yes. Don't you understand? You saved Bubbles. You've given back a life for the life you took. Can't you see that no memory of Miles could ever hurt us now—because of that memory of Bubbles?"

He turned to her, a new light in his eyes, the light of an almost incredible hope fighting against a disciplined endurance of things hard to be borne.

"Do you mean that, Pam?" he said.

She bent her head.

"I mean it. You said—the last time we were together—that 'nothing was actually altered.' But now—everything is altered. Blake——"

But the tremulous appeal in her voice was quenched—quenched by his lips on hers as he realized that the last and final barrier was down, that the shadow of the past, which for so many weary months had obscured the way, had no longer any power to hurt.

Later on, when the first wonder and glory of reunion had lost itself in the realization of perfect understanding, Blake said quietly:

"So, after all, beloved, you have kindled a flame on a burnt-out hearth. You are rather a wonderful woman, you know."

She smiled across at him.

"Have you forgotten, Blake?"

"Forgotten?"

She quoted softly:

"A fire is never dead
While the ashes are still red,
Nor the sun set in the skies until the day is done."

THE END